

The Biblical and Historical Significance of Pentecost:

A Study of the Old and New Covenants

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I. Introduction

Pentecost, also known as the Feast of Weeks or Shavuot, holds profound significance in both Jewish and Christian traditions. For the Jewish people, it commemorates the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai, marking the moment when Israel became a covenant nation under God. For Christians, Pentecost signifies the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which inaugurated the New Covenant and the birth of the Christian Church. This study explores the deep connections between the Old and New Covenants, both of which are believed by some to have been given on Pentecost, and the symbolism of the two loaves offered during this festival.

II. Pentecost and the Old Covenant

A. Historical Background

The Old Covenant, established through Moses, was a defining moment in the history of Israel. According to the Torah, the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai in the third month after their exodus from Egypt. It was here, amidst thunder, lightning, and the sound of a trumpet, that God delivered the Ten Commandments, thus establishing the Old Covenant.

Exodus 19 records the preparation of the people for this divine encounter, culminating in the giving of the Law in **Exodus 20**. Although the text does not explicitly state the connection to Pentecost, Jewish tradition holds that this event occurred fifty days after the Exodus, corresponding to the timing of the Feast of Weeks.

B. Jewish Tradition and the Giving of the Law

The association between Pentecost and the giving of the Law is rooted in Jewish tradition, which sees this festival as a celebration of the Torah, God's covenantal gift to Israel.

- **Philo of Alexandria**, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher of the first century, elaborates on this in his works, describing the Feast of Weeks as the time when God revealed His Law to Israel. Philo's writings provide a link between the Jewish understanding of Pentecost and its later Christian reinterpretation.
- **Josephus**, the Jewish historian, also refers to Pentecost as one of the major pilgrimage festivals, during which Jews from around the world would gather in Jerusalem. While Josephus does not directly connect the festival with the giving of the Law, his accounts align with the biblical description of the Feast of Weeks as a time of communal worship and thanksgiving.

C. The Law as the Foundation of the Old Covenant

The giving of the Law at Sinai was more than a mere legal code; it was the foundation of the Old Covenant, a binding agreement between God and Israel. The Law defined the terms of this relationship, setting Israel apart as a holy nation and a kingdom of priests (**Exodus 19:5-6**). The Feast of Weeks, therefore, not only commemorated the harvest but also celebrated the covenantal relationship established at Sinai.

III. Pentecost and the New Covenant

A. The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit

Pentecost in the New Testament represents a transformative moment, where the outpouring of the Holy Spirit marked the beginning of the Christian Church and the inauguration of the New Covenant. As recorded in **Acts 2:1-4**, the disciples were gathered in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit descended upon them, enabling them to speak in various languages and empowering them to spread the Gospel.

However, this pivotal event was preceded by an essential requirement: Jesus had to ascend to the Father before He could send the Holy Spirit to His disciples. This necessity is highlighted in **John 16:7**, where Jesus explains to His disciples:

"Nevertheless, I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you."

Furthermore, after His resurrection, Jesus emphasized this point to Mary Magdalene, instructing her not to cling to Him because He had not yet ascended to the Father. In **John 20:17**, He says:

"Jesus said to her, 'Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God."'"

These passages indicate that Christ's ascension was a crucial step in the fulfillment of the New Covenant. It was only after ascending to the Father that Jesus could receive the Holy Spirit and then send it to His disciples, as He promised in **Acts 1:4-5**:

"And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, 'which,' He said, 'you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'"

This sequence of events underscores the importance of Pentecost.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was not an isolated incident but the culmination of Christ's earthly ministry, His resurrection, and His ascension. It marked the transition from the Old Covenant, based on the Law given at Sinai, to the New Covenant, characterized by the internalization of God's law through the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost, therefore, serves as the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy (**Jeremiah 31:31-34**) that God would establish a New Covenant with His people, writing His law on their hearts. The day of Pentecost, as recorded in Acts, is the moment when this promise began to be realized, with the Holy Spirit empowering the disciples to live out the principles of the New Covenant.

B. Connection to Jeremiah's Prophecy

The New Covenant established at Pentecost was not a departure from the Old, but a fulfillment of the promises made in the Old Testament, particularly in **Jeremiah 31:31-34**:

"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... I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people."

This prophecy foretold a time when God's law would be internalized, written on the hearts of His people. The events of Pentecost, where the Holy Spirit empowered the believers, fulfilled this promise, establishing the New Covenant as the continuation and completion of the Old.

C. Theological Implications

The New Covenant, inaugurated at Pentecost, is characterized by the internalization of God's law and the empowerment of believers through the Holy Spirit. Unlike the Old Covenant, which was based on adherence to the Law, the New Covenant is based on the ratification through the blood of Christ, his sacrifice for our sins, by GOD's grace and faith that Jesus Christ died for our sins. **Eph.2:8-9:**

- *"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."*

The **Book of Hebrews** highlights this transition, emphasizing that the New Covenant is superior to the Old because it is based on better promises (**Hebrews 8:6-13**). The Old Covenant, while foundational, is seen as being fulfilled and transcended by the New Covenant, which offers a deeper, more personal relationship with God.

IV. The Dual Giving of the Covenants on Pentecost

A. Belief that Both Covenants Were Given on Pentecost

Some scholars and theologians believe that both the Old and New Covenants were given on the day of Pentecost, marking it as a day of profound covenantal significance.

- **Old Covenant:** The Old Covenant, given at Mount Sinai, is traditionally associated with Pentecost as the day when God revealed His Law to Israel.
- **New Covenant:** The New Covenant, inaugurated by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2, also occurred on Pentecost, signifying the fulfillment of the Old Covenant's promises.

B. Scriptural and Historical Support

The idea that both covenants were given on Pentecost is supported by both scriptural references and Jewish tradition. The timing of the giving of the Law at Sinai aligns with the Feast of Weeks, and the New Testament's account of the Holy Spirit's descent at Pentecost underscores the continuity between the covenants.

The dual significance of Pentecost highlights its role as a bridge between the Old and New Covenants, where the giving of the Law and the giving of the Spirit are seen as complementary, not contradictory.

V. The Symbolism of the Two Loaves

A. Scriptural Basis

The offering of the two loaves of bread during Pentecost, as described in **Leviticus 23:17**, carries deep symbolic meaning.

"You shall bring out of your habitations two wave loaves of two-tenths of an ephah: they shall be of fine flour; they shall be baked with leaven; they are the firstfruits to the Lord."

B. Symbolic Interpretations

1. Old and New Covenants:

- The two loaves are often seen as representing the Old and New Covenants, highlighting the continuity between them. Just as the two loaves are offered together, the Old and New Covenants are linked, with the New fulfilling the Old.

2. Jew and Gentile:

- Another interpretation is that the two loaves symbolize the unity of Jew and Gentile under the New Covenant, reflecting the inclusivity of the Gospel message that began to spread at Pentecost.

3. Firstfruits of the Harvest:

- The loaves, as the firstfruits offering, symbolize the firstfruits of the spiritual harvest inaugurated at Pentecost, with the believers being the firstfruits of God’s redemptive work.
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- **Storing of the Wheat:** The concept of storing wheat, which is tied to the agricultural cycle and the timing of Pentecost, further reinforces the symbolism of the wheat harvest. In **Matthew 13:30**, Jesus uses the imagery of wheat being gathered into the barn at the time of the harvest to symbolize the gathering of His people. This imagery ties back to the significance of the wheat harvest during Pentecost, symbolizing the gathering of the firstfruits of the New Covenant—the early believers who received the Holy Spirit on this day.

4. Leaven as a Symbol of Transformation:

- Unlike other offerings, these loaves were to be baked with leaven, symbolizing the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, which spreads throughout and changes the believer’s life.

C. Reinforcement of Covenant Connection

The symbolism of the two loaves reinforces the connection between the Old and New Covenants by illustrating their continuity and fulfillment.

The loaves serve as a tangible reminder that the New Covenant is not separate from the Old but is its culmination, bringing to completion God's covenantal promises to His people.

The concept of storing wheat, as part of the agricultural and eschatological imagery, also underscores the idea of a future harvest—where the firstfruits (the early believers) are gathered in anticipation of the greater harvest to come at the end of the age. This further solidifies the significance of Pentecost as not just a historical event but a prophetic symbol of God's ongoing plan for redemption.

VI. Conclusion

Pentecost stands as a pivotal moment in both the Old and New Covenants, marking the giving of the Law and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The symbolism of the two loaves offered on this day serves to emphasize the continuity of God's redemptive plan, uniting the Old and New Covenants in a profound and transformative way.

Through the lens of Pentecost, we see the progression from the external Law of the Old Covenant to the internal transformation of the New Covenant, where God's law is written on the hearts of believers through the Holy Spirit.

The concept of storing wheat as part of the Pentecost imagery further enriches this understanding, pointing to the firstfruits of the spiritual harvest and the future gathering of all believers.

This study affirms the significance of Pentecost as a day of covenantal renewal and fulfillment, where God's promises are realized, and His people are empowered to live out their faith in a new and living way.
