

## SOME QUESTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS REGARDING THE NEW COVENANT

### Various Understandings

The purpose of this paper is simply to raise some questions about the "traditional" understanding of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34) and the relationship of the church to the fulfillment of the covenant. The approach first will briefly mention some of the various understandings of this passage. The passage will then be looked at as it was given in its Old Testament context. Finally some questions will be raised which relate to the Old Testament meaning of the text, and then its use in the New Testament its relation to the church.

It is generally acknowledged by covenant amillennialists that the New Covenant is being fulfilled in some way or measure by the church at the present time (Mt. 26:26-29; Mk. 14:22-25; Lk. 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:13; 10:15-17). The importance of the New Covenant and the church's relationship to it was clearly pointed out by Wyngaarden.<sup>1</sup> If the church is presently fulfilling the "New Covenant" of Jeremiah 31:31-34, the idea that the church replaces Israel in the fulfillment of kingdom prophecies is a viable exegetical position based on the New Testament's use of the Old Testament. While Gundry maintains a premillennial and dispensational perspective, he uses the church's fulfillment of the New Covenant to break down a rigid distinction between the church and Israel so as to allow the church and Israel to overlap thus supporting or allowing for a posttribulational rapture.<sup>2</sup> Gundry's position is mentioned simply to illustrate that it seems to follow the closer the connection of the church to the New Covenant the closer is the church's relationship to Israel.

The relationship of the New Covenant to the church is not quite so straightforward in dispensational theology as it seems to be in covenant amillennialism. The view of the church's present fulfillment, in some measure, of the New Covenant seems, however, to be the most prevalent view today. Historically, in dispensationalism, there have been differing views. Darby maintained the New Covenant was only for Israel. Blessings from the New Covenant "spill" over into the church.

On the other hand, some, such as Chafer, Walvoord, and Ryrie have at one time held there are two "New Covenants."<sup>3</sup> It appears

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<sup>1</sup>Martin J. Wyngaarden, The Future of the Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfillment, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1934)

<sup>2</sup>Robert H. Gundry, The Church and the Tribulation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), pp. 16ff.

<sup>3</sup>Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology (Dallas, Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 7:98-99  
Charles C. Ryrie, The Basis of the Premillennial Faith (Neptune, Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), pp. 105-125

this view is no longer being espoused. Ryrie no longer holds it and it appears Walvoord has also moved away from this earlier position. Walvoord says:

Everyone agrees that when Christ died, He brought in the New Covenant. Everyone agrees that this New Covenant has an application to Israel, an application to the Church, and in fact an application to saints of all ages. Whether the New Covenant is regarded as having a two-fold application--one to Israel and the other to the Church--or whether it is regarded as two covenants stemming from the death of Christ, is mostly a problem with words.<sup>4</sup>

Less clear to me is the position Walvoord is espousing in his more recent work.<sup>5</sup>

Scofield's view holds to one New Covenant which applies to both Israel and the church. Ramm made a telling comment years ago about this position when he said, "To say we are under the benefits of the covenant without actually being under the covenant is to clandestinely admit what is boldly denied."<sup>6</sup>

Feinberg's understanding of the church's relationship to Old Testament prophecy (specifically illustrated with Joel 2:28-32 and Acts 2:16-21) may provide the cleanest dispensational method for dealing with the New Covenant. He suggests the New Testament may expand the Old Testament meaning without in any way subtracting from the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy. In other words the New Covenant was given to Israel and will be fulfilled by Israel. The New Testament, however, adds the idea that the church also receives the same promised blessings now in addition to what Israel will receive in the future. This view keeps the distinction between the church and Israel while the church enters in to the New Covenant blessings.<sup>7</sup> "It is one thing to say that Jeremiah was not given to see what the new covenant would mean for the world, it is entirely another to say that by Israel and Judah he really meant the church...."<sup>8</sup>

The number of ways dispensational theologians have handled the New Covenant and its relationship to the church may indicate the difficulties dispensationalists have in dealing with the relationship of the New Covenant to the church.

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<sup>4</sup>John F. Walvoord, The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 66

<sup>5</sup>John F. Walvoord, The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1990), pp. 501ff

<sup>6</sup>Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956), p. 245

<sup>7</sup>John S. Feinberg, editor, Continuity and Discontinuity, "Hermeneutics of Discontinuity," Paul D. Feinberg, (Westchester, Crossway Books, 1988), pp. 109-128

<sup>8</sup>Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, p. 179, citing Ellison, Men Spoke from God, p. 92

One thing that appears to be held in common, despite one's theological orientation, is the New Covenant is related to the saving act of God by which the individual is brought into the family of God. Kent is an example of this. "The New Covenant, however, guarantees regeneration to its beneficiaries."<sup>9</sup> Kent takes the view of the Scofield Bible because he quotes the note for Hebrews 8:8 from the 1917 edition. He sees the new covenant for believers today and for Israel. (cf. Kent, The Epistle to the Hebrews, p. 155-160) This is the same view as Ryrle in the Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 1, p. 392, "Covenant, New") "It is clear that all these benefits belong, in fact, to all the regenerate of every age since the Cross."<sup>10</sup> "The New Covenant is God's appointed vehicle for fulfilling the Abrahamic blessings to Israel. But the Abrahamic Covenant also promised universal blessing, so the New Covenant becomes as well God's vehicle of salvation for believers since the Cross."<sup>11</sup> "From Paul's perspective, the day anticipated by Jeremiah in his prophecy respecting the new covenant now has been realized. God's people truly are one with him in the unity of the covenant which bypasses all mediatorial relationships."<sup>12</sup>

Rarely has this author seen an exegetical discussion of the Jeremiah text, in its Old Testament context, in the theological discussions of the New Covenant whether it be from a dispensational or covenant amillennial perspective. The purpose of this paper is thus to briefly look at the text in its Old Testament context and to raise questions that might prove fruitful in better understanding the text and its theological significance.

#### Jeremiah 31:31-34

Thompson begins his discussion of the passage with the following statement. "This is the only reference to a *new covenant* in the OT."<sup>13</sup> The adjective "new" immediately raises the question of to what it is being compared. The context of the Jeremiah passage indicates this "new" covenant is being compared to the Mosaic covenant made with Israel after God's deliverance of His people from Egypt (verse 32). The "New Covenant" then was prophesied by Jeremiah as the replacement for the earlier Mosaic

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<sup>9</sup>"The New Covenant and the Church", Homer A. Kent, *Grace Theological Journal*, Vol 6, #2, Fall, 1985, p. 294)

<sup>10</sup>Hodges, "Hebrews," The Bible Knowledge Commentary, p. 800)

<sup>11</sup>Hodges, "Hebrews," The Bible Knowledge Commentary, p. 800

<sup>12</sup>O. Palmer Robertson, The Christ of the Covenants, (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), p. 296.

<sup>13</sup>J. A. Thompson, The Book of Jeremiah (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 579

covenant (Ex. 19:1-24:11). The author of Hebrews notes that with this announcement the Mosaic covenant must be understood as temporary (Heb. 8:13).

Since the "New Covenant" replaces the Mosaic, it seems pertinent to ask the purpose of the Mosaic covenant. Was it a covenant given to a redeemed people and if so what kind of redemption was involved? It seems that the similarity of the Mosaic covenant to secular suzerainty treaties would argue that the covenant was made with a people claimed to be Jahweh's. Jahweh claimed these people as His vassals and they were acknowledging their willingness to submit to His stipulations.

The more difficult question relates to the redemption provided by Jahweh that led to this covenant bond. Was this redemption simply physical-political was it physical-political/spiritual, or was it something else entirely? The answer given to this question, of course, has theological implications beyond the limited scope of this paper. To limit the redemption primarily to a physical-political dimension seems difficult to square with subsequent Scripture that looks back to God's bringing the children out of Egypt from the perspective of a great spiritual deliverance as well.<sup>14</sup> The memorial of Passover hardly seems to be satisfied if but a few of the people were actually members of the family of God. Would Christ be described as the Passover Lamb if the type of which He is the antitype was primarily related to simply physical-political redemption? Even the expression "took them by the hand" (Jer. 31:32) might indicate some sort of special relationship. Furthermore, Jeremiah 31:32 indicates Jahweh considered Israel to be His wife at the time the covenant was given at Sinai. Would such a redemptive perspective do justice to the marriage relationship pictured by other prophets or the statement in Hosea 11:1, "out of Egypt I called my son" (cf. Matt. 2:15)?<sup>15</sup>

In light of these factors, it seems best to this writer to think of the Mosaic covenant as given to a redeemed (spiritual/physical-political) people who belonged to Jahweh. Their physical redemption illustrated their spiritual redemption. Using the terms in a theological sense, the Mosaic covenant looked at the peoples' sanctification and/or glorification. The issue of 'justification' for that first generation had been settled when they had placed their faith in Jahweh and had believed what He

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<sup>14</sup>cf. Exodus 15; Psalm 77; 78; 81:6-16; 115

<sup>15</sup>Of course the question that arises if the exodus is as much a spiritual as a physical-political redemption relates to the failure of that generation to enter the promised land. Did they lose their salvation because of the events leading up to and including their refusal to enter the promise land at Kadesh Barnea (Num. 14)? Was Kadesh Barnea an illustration of the response of carnal but "saved" people? Were the Israelites genuinely "saved?" This would seem to have all sorts of interesting implications for Arminians versus Calvinists, and in the so-called "Lordship" salvation discussion.

had said through His spokesman, Moses.

Why did the Mosaic covenant need to be replaced? The answer is given by Jahweh through Jeremiah that His people had not obeyed the Mosaic covenant and thus had not pleased Him (Jer. 31:32). Since the blessings He had promised were determined by the peoples' obedience, those promised blessings would never be realized unless covenant obedience relied only on the divine initiative (Jer 31:33) and not human initiative.

It would appear that since the Mosaic covenant was dealing with a post-justification relationship one should also see the New Covenant in the same light because of the parallel drawn by Jeremiah. The New Covenant would then be viewed as God's unconditional and unilateral promise of sanctification/glorification to replace the conditional bilateral relationship found in the Mosaic covenant. Just as God's election of Israel was unilateral and unconditional so also would their future blessings be under the New Covenant. This type of symmetry is supported by the structure of the passage as indicated by Holladay. "...the passage structurally breaks in two, a prose section (vv 31-33a $\alpha$ ) and a poetic section (vv 33a $\beta$ -34), each chiastic in form - the first section centering on the old covenant, the second on the new."<sup>16</sup>

The New Covenant will be a divine work in the lives of the people of God that will guarantee they will not violate the covenant stipulations. In fact, God guarantees their doing what the people had not done before the realization of the promises of the New Covenant. This was necessary because, prior to the fulfillment of the New Covenant, the people "were incapable of such obedience."<sup>17</sup> With the New Covenant the law of God would be in them and on their hearts so that instead of "breaking" they would be keeping the commandments of God that would bring them to the place of complete divine blessing. If the place of the Mosaic covenant has been correctly understood, and if the New Covenant replaces the Mosaic, then it appears the statement, "I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jer. 31:34) would look at a time in the lives of the people of God when they will sin no more (unlike the Israelites who had been redeemed out of Egypt).

Holladay suggests this divine transformation may indicate "a renewal of worship in the temple."<sup>18</sup> "The other direction of meaning is the one commonly understood: Yahweh's law will be

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<sup>16</sup>William L. Holladay, Jeremiah 2, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1989), p. 197

<sup>17</sup>J. A. Thompson, The Book of Jeremiah (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 580

<sup>18</sup>William L. Holladay, Jeremiah 2, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1989), p. 198

written in the interior intertentionality of the people.<sup>19</sup> It seems it is the believer's relationship to the Yahweh that is being spoken of. In saying this, it is important to keep in mind that a work of God to bring a person into the family of God is presupposed. In either case, what is commonly called sanctification or glorification is what is being discussed.<sup>20</sup> This would be the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 30:5-6.

#### Some Questions

Based on the Old Testament context and teaching of Jeremiah 31:31-34 why is it that the New Covenant seems to be understood by some more as a gracious provision of God to bring us into the family of God than as something related to a believer's sanctification? This seems to be Walvoord's perspective.<sup>21</sup>

Did Christ at the Last Supper inaugurate the New Covenant age or was the covenant simply "cut" at the time of the death of Christ? Robertson argues for the former.<sup>22</sup> In so doing he faces the problem of how to deal with the data of the New Covenant and our present situation as believers. He lists and discusses four possibilities.<sup>23</sup>

How does Jeremiah's statement about not teaching (Jer. 31:34) relate to the Great Commission? To say that the need "to mediate the covenant would disappear does not appear to be a "natural" interpretation.<sup>24</sup>

Why are the Old Testament saints valid examples of spirituality if the New Covenant was not operational in their lives but is in the believers' lives today?

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<sup>19</sup>William L. Holladay, Jeremiah 2, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1989), p. 198. cf. O. Palmer Robertson, The Christ of the Covenants, (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), p. 276

<sup>20</sup>It was indicated above that this also was the intent of the Mosaic covenant.

<sup>21</sup>John F. Walvoord, The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1990), pp. 502ff.

<sup>22</sup>O. Palmer Robertson, The Christ of the Covenants, (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), p. 297

<sup>23</sup>O. Palmer Robertson, The Christ of the Covenants, (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), p. 297-300

<sup>24</sup>O. Palmer Robertson, The Christ of the Covenants, (Phillipsburg, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), p. 293ff.

"new covenant" cf. "The New Covenant and the Church", Homer A. Kent, *Grace Theological Journal*, Vol 6, #2, Fall, 1985, p.289-298.

"The New Covenant, however, guarantees regeneration to its beneficiaries." (Kent, p. 294)

Kent takes the view of the Scofield Bible because he quotes the note for Hebrews 8:8 from the 1917 edition. He sees the new covenant for believers today and for Israel. (cf. Kent, The Epistle to the Hebrews, p. 155-160) This is the same view as Ryrie in the Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia, Vol. 1, p. 392, "Covenant, New") "It is clear that all these benefits belong, in fact, to all the regenerate of every age since the Cross."

(Hodges, "Hebrews," The Bible Knowledge Commentary, p. 800)

It should be noted that God could "add" the Church to the list of beneficiaries of the New Covenant without in any way taking away something from Israel. This could simply be the result of "progressive revelation." "The New Covenant is God's appointed vehicle for fulfilling the Abrahamic blessings to Israel. But the Abrahamic Covenant also promised universal blessing, so the New Covenant becomes as well God's vehicle of salvation for believers since the Cross. (Hodges, "Hebrews," The Bible Knowledge Commentary, p. 800)

The problem with these views, from my perspective, is that they fail to deal with the purpose of the Mosaic covenant, its weakness (flesh), and the purpose of the New covenant. Up to this point in Hebrews the emphasis has been in the area of sanctification and not salvation.

cf. Hebrews 10:16-17 where the passage is cited again.

"It is one thing to say that Jeremiah was not given to see what the new covenant would mean for the world, it is entirely another to say that by Israel and Judah he really meant the church...." (Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, p. 179, citing Ellison, Men Spoke from God, p. 92)