

## F. The New Covenant

The so-called “New Covenant” is the last of the covenants contained in Israel’s scriptures. Though Christians often associate the New Covenant with the New Testament, it is a climactic topic within the Old Testament scriptures. It follows upon and presupposes the other biblical covenants, but unlike them, the New Covenant is treated entirely as a *future* reality. The other covenants also had a future orientation, but one grounded in their present existence and relevance. They had a prophetic dimension, but were enacted at the time God disclosed them. The New Covenant is unique in that the Scriptures introduce it as a covenantal relationship reserved for a future time – *the time associated with the future dimension of the other covenants*. That is, the New Covenant concerns the time of creational renewal indicated by the Noahic Covenant, the formation of the new human community at the heart of the Abrahamic and Israelite covenants, and the establishment of God’s rule in the earth as promised by the Davidic Covenant. In a word, the New Covenant pertains to the eschatological *kingdom of God*: the intended Creator-creation relationship first depicted in Eden and then progressively disclosed and worked toward in the subsequent history of the Hebrew people.

Thus the New Covenant represents the consummation of God’s relationship with His creation centered in man, the image-son. It is the destiny of all of the other covenants – the purpose for which they were enacted and the outcome to which they pointed. Each of the biblical covenants presupposed and built upon its predecessors so that, together, they gave definition and form to God’s great scriptural promise for the future. The New Covenant is presented as the realization of that promise. The relation it has with its counterparts is that of promise/fulfillment.

1. Given the relationship between the New Covenant and the other biblical covenants, it shouldn’t be surprising that the Scriptures introduce it in the context of Israel’s exile and the destruction of the Israelite kingdom. For that kingdom, brought to its apex by David, was a central premise in the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants and each of them, in their own way, anticipated the kingdom’s failure. Moses and Joshua explicitly predicted it (Deuteronomy 28-29; Joshua 23-24), as did Israel’s prophets who emerged after David’s reign during the declining era of the divided kingdom. Whether they prophesied before, during or after the Babylonian conquest which ended David’s kingdom, all of the biblical prophets had Israel’s exile as a central concern.

If David’s reign marked the pinnacle of the Israelite kingdom promised to Abraham and his “seed,” so the destruction of that kingdom and the exile of the covenant household testified to the collapse of the covenant. And the failure of the covenant was due solely to the failure of the covenant “son” to fulfill the covenant charter. Thus both houses of Israel were exiled by foreign powers and Yahweh Himself abandoned them (Ezekiel 10). The covenant relationship between Abraham’s God and his descendents was in ruins and Israel’s kings, prophets, priests and people alike shared the fault. Long years of patience and pleas had no effect, so that Yahweh finally departed, leaving the covenant kingdom, Jerusalem and His sanctuary devastated and desolate. This outcome was horrifying and profoundly tragic for the children of Israel, but all the more because of their vocation as the Abrahamic people: *Israel’s failure to fulfill its sonship meant that Yahweh’s determination to bless all the earth’s families through Israel would not be realized.*

Thus the Babylonian exile had a greater significance than the destruction of David's kingdom; it jeopardized God's covenant with Abraham and therefore His intent for the whole world. Israel's failure to fulfill its vocation created a quandary with only three possible resolutions: 1) God's purposes would fail; 2) God would abandon His oath and covenant with Abraham and devise a new scheme to accomplish His purposes; 3) God would somehow cause Israel to fulfill its calling as the Abrahamic seed. *The prophets revealed that He'd chosen the latter; Yahweh was going to secure Israel's faithfulness to its covenant vocation. Most importantly, He would do so by raising up a faithful individual from within Israel – an Israelite indeed who would fulfill Israel's identity and calling as son, servant, disciple and witness.* This one was going to fulfill Israel's vocation, but on behalf of Israel:

- This son of Abraham – this servant “Israel” – was to be Yahweh's instrument to restore Abraham's household and fulfill His pledge to make Abraham the father of many nations as the mediator of His blessing to all people.
- Moreover, the prophets indicated that this son of Abraham would be the son promised to David – the son whose kingdom Yahweh swore to establish forever; the son in whom He'd build for David a royal house and everlasting throne and kingdom (cf. Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1-12, 49:1-10; also Amos 9:11ff; Zechariah 6:9-15).

Through this faithful son “Israel” the Lord would fulfill His covenant oaths to Abraham and David, restoring the Abrahamic household in order that it should fulfill its calling on behalf of the world. This son would reunite the covenant Father and covenant children, and this meant bringing an end to their exile and securing Yahweh's return to again dwell in their midst. But this reunion had a prerequisite: The unfaithfulness and rebellion which had broken the covenant relationship needed to be addressed. The end of Israel's exile and Yahweh's return depended upon forgiveness and cleansing.

2. Rejection, desolation and exile resulting from covenant violation was the context for the Old Testament's introduction of the New Covenant. God's promises to Abraham, Israel and David suggested such an arrangement, but the prophets spoke openly of a future covenant renewal. Israel proved incapable of fulfilling its identity and vocation, but God insisted that that wasn't to be the last word; when Israel had filled up the full measure of its unfaithfulness and received its full recompense, then Yahweh would arise and intervene, at last giving His sons eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts to know Him and love and serve Him (Deuteronomy 30:1-6). At the appointed time, the Lord was going to renew His covenant with Israel and fulfill His oath to Abraham and David.

All of Israel's prophets held out the hope of a future day of renewal, reconciliation and regathering. But it was Jeremiah who first spoke directly of a *new covenant* (31:31-34). This came in the context of a larger prophecy pertaining to the reunification of the two houses of Israel (*Israel* in the north and *Judah* in the south). And because this reconciliation within Israel presupposed Israel's reconciliation with her God, the prophecy emphasized the restoration of Zion as Yahweh's dwelling place and Israel's return to Zion as her long night of exile finally came to an end (30:1-31:40).

Judgment of unfaithfulness, destruction of the Davidic kingdom and exile were the historical context for Jeremiah's prophecy of a new covenant (1:1-3), but his own prophetic ministry also colored the prophecy and its significance. For Yahweh called Jeremiah to be his prophet to the *nations* (1:4-5); though he spoke directly to the people of Judah, Jeremiah's prophetic calling ultimately concerned the Gentile world. Some connect this with Jeremiah's time in Egypt following Jerusalem's conquest, but the Lord had something else in mind when He commissioned Jeremiah as His prophet to the nations: He would fulfill this Gentile calling by his prophetic ministry in and to Judah as the remnant of David's kingdom. Jeremiah prophesied of conquest, desolation and exile, but also of a future glorious restoration of David's house and kingdom. In this way he reminded his Jewish audience of the nature and purpose of Israel's covenant calling and its role in Yahweh's purposes for the world. *God's interaction with them didn't just concern them, but His designs for the entire human world.* When Yahweh sent Jeremiah to Judah he was doing so on behalf of the nations (cf. 1:10, 4:1-2, 12:14-17).

- a. This is the lens through which Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant must be read – notably as he designated it a covenant with *Israel* and *Judah* (31:31). This designation has caused some (particularly within Dispensationalism) to conclude that this “new covenant” is strictly an Israelite covenant and therefore distinguished from the New Covenant of the New Testament. Others maintain that Jeremiah's covenant does indeed pertain to the Jewish people, but the Christian Church is allowed to enjoy its blessings in the present “church age.” Nevertheless, the covenant will actually come into force at the end of the age when Israel is united with its Messiah. On the other hand, many Reformed Christians minimize the Jewish designation of this covenant under the premise that *Israel* has taken the form of the *Church* under the present administration of the “covenant of grace.”

But a couple of considerations help explain Jeremiah's Jewish designation:

- 1) First, this covenant *must* pertain first and foremost to Abraham's descendents (Israel and Judah) if it is to pertain to the Gentiles. For God determined that reconciliation and sonship for the world of men was to come through Abraham's seed. Salvation originates with the Jews, even as the gospel of God's triumph in the Messiah is to the Jew first and then to the Gentile (cf. John 4:21-24; Romans 1:16, 2:9-10). Reconciliation and restoration must come to Israel first if it is to come to the nations.
- 2) At the same time, this promised outcome for Israel *assures* the same outcome for the Gentiles (ref. Isaiah 2:1-4, 11:1-12, 19:18-25, 49:1-7; also Amos 9:11-15; Zechariah 2:1-13, 6:9-15, 8:1-23, 9:9-10; cf. Ephesians 2:11ff). *It's precisely by being an Israelite covenant that Jeremiah's new covenant pertains to the Gentiles – not secondarily, but by design.*

Jeremiah's Jewish designation, then, so far from excluding the Gentiles, actually emphasizes how the Gentiles were to have a share in this new covenant. What the covenant held out to the Israelite people it held out to the nations of the world.

- b. And what Yahweh promised in His covenant oath was the renewal of his relationship with Israel. He established that relationship at Sinai, but the covenant failed because Israel proved to be an unfaithful son. Yahweh upheld the covenant relationship, though Israel never did – even from the beginning (31:32). Thus this “new” covenant was going to differ from its predecessor in *securing forever* the relationship the covenant at Sinai defined and prescribed; it would see the Abrahamic “seed” becoming sons of God in truth – sons who truly *know* Him. Yahweh Himself would impart this knowledge by a work of inner renewal and transformation – by writing His Torah on human hearts and minds. No longer would Torah consist of ideas and instruction to be pondered and complied with; this “new covenant” would see Torah become a living reality – the new paradigm of human existence (31:33-34). It would see Abraham’s descendents becoming sons of God *indeed* – sons who bear the life and likeness of their Father.
- c. Jeremiah’s “new covenant” promised a new paradigm in Israel’s relationship with God, but this implied the end of the present paradigm. Israel and Judah were estranged from Yahweh even as they were estranged from one another. He’d forsaken them and left them to destruction; He abandoned His sanctuary and later destroyed it, driving His covenant sons into exile far from His holy mountain. God was promising a “new” covenant relationship with Abraham’s offspring, but He first had to reconcile them to Himself; the new covenant was the pledge of *forgiveness*. Alienation and exile resulted from sin and iniquity; forgiveness and cleansing would bring the end of exile and the reconciliation of Father and son.

One crucial implication of Jeremiah’s new covenant is that it promised a *new order* in the scheme of God’s interaction with Israel. In one sense, it represented a renewal of the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Abraham’s offspring. But this renewal wouldn’t resurrect the former order of things. Rather, it was going to bring about – by the Lord’s own power and hand – that which the former order only prefigured (cf. Deuteronomy 29:1-4, 30:1-6; Ezekiel 36:16-37:28). This new covenant would fulfill and make fruitful Yahweh’s covenant relationship with Israel initiated in the Abrahamic Covenant, ratified with the Israelite nation at Sinai and furthered developed in the Davidic Covenant. (Note that the merging of the kingship and priesthood in relation to David also indicated an entirely new order for the kingdom God promised to him – cf. Psalm 110 with Hebrews 7:1-8:13.) All of God’s covenants, as indeed all of His Torah, were to find their destiny in Jeremiah’s everlasting new covenant to be established with the coming and reign of David’s promised royal seed (ref. Jeremiah 30:4-11, 33:1-26).

So this new order clarifies the concept of *Torah* in relation to this new covenant. Once again the tendency is to defer to artificial categories such as conditional/unconditional, law/grace and moral/civil/ceremonial. This leads some to conclude that the “law” Jeremiah spoke of has no inherent relation to the “law of Moses,” since the Old Covenant was a “law covenant” and the New Covenant is a “grace covenant.” Some go so far as to say that those under the New Covenant have no relationship to law whatsoever – they are “under grace” and not “under law.” They argue that the New Covenant imposes only the obligation of *faith*. Faith produces “good works,” but these works carry no legal merit.

Similar wrongful distinctions and conclusions derive from viewing the Old Covenant as “conditional” and the New Covenant as “unconditional.” Here the emphasis is often on the notion that those under the Old Covenant (“Law of Moses”) were personally obligated to meet the law’s demands, while no such obligation exists for those under the New Covenant. The latter is “unconditional,” not because God no longer demands perfect moral righteousness, but because Jesus has met that “condition” on their behalf.

These and other assumed premises naturally inform the way we interpret Jeremiah’s words, with the result that his meaning is often missed (or at least badly skewed). But Jeremiah’s promise becomes clear and profound when we approach it from the Scripture’s own perspective and through the lens it provides.

Again, it is critically important that Torah be understood *scripturally* within its Jewish and salvation-historical context. Torah is preeminently a covenantal and relational concept, not a moral and legal one as such. Torah defines, informs and prescribes the divine/human relationship by disclosing to men the truth of the person and purpose of God and the corresponding truth of man. It does not identify a divine moral standard to which men must comply if they are to avoid condemnation and everlasting punishment.

So the Torah of the Old Covenant wasn’t a legally binding moral standard by which Jews (and Gentile proselytes) could be “saved” if they fully complied with it. It was God’s revelation and instruction to the Israelite people concerning their Abrahamic identity and calling. The covenant’s *torah* obligated Israel’s “obedience,” but obedience as relational integrity and faithfulness; *it prescribed conformity to the Abrahamic vocation of sonship on behalf of the world*. Torah – the Law of Moses – was concerned with Israel’s role in God’s purposes, not the personal salvation of individual Israelites.

With respect to the future “new covenant,” Jeremiah prophesied that it would see Yahweh’s Torah written on the hearts and minds of His people. They would “keep Torah” by *being* the faithful sons Torah prescribed. In Jeremiah’s prophecy, then, the fundamental distinction between the Old and New Covenants is the issue of authentic sonship under the Abrahamic charter, not how it is that a person meets the moral and legal criterion for personal salvation. What Jeremiah was holding out to his hearers – i.e., the remnant of Israel about to experience the end of the Israelite kingdom, captivity and exile – was the glorious truth that Yahweh would yet fulfill His oath to Abraham and David; despite what was coming upon the covenant house, Israel would yet become Israel *in truth*. The Torah that defined Israel and prescribed its vocation would one day become a living, transformative reality.

In that day, Yahweh would renew His inheritance, creating authentic children for Abraham by joining Abraham’s offspring to his unique Son – the One who is the human embodiment of Torah, and therefore the True Israel. And as Yahweh reconstituted Israel in Him, so this renewed Israel would at last fulfill its vocation on behalf of the nations. Bearing His life and the gospel of His kingdom, they would go out into all the world, bringing Yahweh’s blessing to the Gentiles and taking the nations captive to their true and everlasting King (cf. Amos 9:11-12 with Acts 15:1-32; also Zechariah 9:9-10).