

THE NEW COVENANT ACCORDING TO JEREMIAH 31:31-37

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Introduction

Nearly all the prophets in the Old Testament included a message of future hope for Israel in light of their present distress and discipline. Jeremiah certainly falls into this category. Jeremiah 31:31-37 provides perhaps the greatest message of hope for Israel. This passage reveals the promise of a “new covenant”. Essentially, this new covenant will fulfill all that the old covenant could not. Specifically, it will cause Israel to be in perfect fellowship with their creator and will allow them to never again face the divine discipline cycles that made up most of their history. The aim of this paper is to provide some contextual elements to the prophet Jeremiah and his prophetic message to Israel. From that framework it will be shown the important observation found in Jeremiah 31:31-37. This exposition should lead to a foundational understanding of the new covenant and its relationship to God’s chosen nation Israel.

Contextual Elements:

The prophet Jeremiah is one of the most significant prophets to be used by God during one of the most significant periods of Israel’s dramatic history. The beginning of Jeremiah’s writing includes four personal details. The first, is that Jeremiah is the son of Hilkiyah. Hilkiyah was a common name in those days but an interesting possibility is that this was the priest that found the book of the law in the temple during the days of Josiah.¹ The second detail is that Hilkiyah is of the priests, which means that Jeremiah has priestly ancestry. Third, the specific priests that Hilkiyah was associated with were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, just north of Jerusalem. Finally, it is shown in the introduction an important key to any prophetic book. It says, “to whom the word of the Lord came”. This detail is significant because it shows that

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Je 1:1.)

Jeremiah was chosen by God to bear a particular message as is the case with all of the prophets. But this detail makes Jeremiah among the company of divine messengers.

The introduction to Jeremiah's writing includes helpful dating information. It says the word of the Lord came in the days of Josiah, specifically the thirteenth year of his reign (627 B.C.). It also came in the days of Jehoiakim (609-598 B.C.) until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah (586 B.C.), until the carrying away of Jerusalem captive in the 5th month (586 B.C.)² These facts inform the reader that Jeremiah ministered during the time immediately before Judah was taken captive to Babylon because of God's disciplinary judgment (Lev. 26:43).

Jeremiah's call to be a prophet is highlighted in 1:4-10. There are four elements to Jeremiah's call. First, God tells him that "before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you". This information would be an encouragement to Jeremiah in preparing him for the task that lay ahead of him. Second, God tells him "I ordained you a prophet to the nations." This ordination is linked with God's setting Jeremiah apart before birth. In this regard, Jeremiah shares a similar calling as did the Apostle Paul. Notice Galatians 1:15 "But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles". The third element to Jeremiah's call is that it included divine security to protect his prophetic ministry and enabling his ministry to be accomplished. The admonition in verse 8 to "not be afraid" is strengthened by the promise of God to be with Jeremiah and to deliver him. The final element deals with the nature of Jeremiah's call. Verse 10 informs Jeremiah that his ministry will be over nation and kingdoms. This depicts Jeremiah's call as directly related with the sovereign rule of God over all

² Ibid.

nations. This becomes particularly clear when prophesying Israel's protection during captivity and their ultimate restoration.

Verse-by-verse Exposition:

Jeremiah 31:31-37 can be broken into three parts. These three parts comprise the revelation of the new covenant (vv. 31-32), the description of the new covenant (vv. 33-34), and the security of the new covenant (vv. 35-37). Noticing certain observations within this passage, will lead the student of the new covenant toward a better understanding of this important doctrine. This passage lays the framework of the new covenant, while all other associated passages fill in the spaces. Because of this, understanding this passage in Jeremiah's writing is crucial to understanding the new covenant.

Part 1: Revelation of a new covenant vv. 31-32

The first part of Jeremiah 31:31-37 reveals the promise of a new covenant. There are several observations in vv. 31-32 that convey the details of this new covenant. The first observation is that the revelation of this new covenant is from God. This is significant for two reasons. First, all revelation is from God and this fact is a clear marker of the distinction that exists between the Creator God, and all creation. He is the revealer of knowledge. The second significance to this is it shows God's fervent love for His covenant people Israel who are the recipients of this new covenant. The receiving party will be covered in a moment, but it should not be missed that the obvious intention of the Creator is to continue His covenantal relationship with Israel. The means by which that relationship will be improved is further developed.

The second observation is the new covenant is future. The futuristic markers for this covenant are “the days are coming” (v. 31), and “after those days” (v. 33).) The nearest possible referent to the phrase “those days” would be what is described in chapter 30 of Jeremiah. In chapter 30 there are three significant events. First, the captives of Israel and Judah are regathered (cf. 30:3). Second, the Day of the Lord is brought upon the earth and has specific intentions for Israel (cf. 30:5-7). Third, The result of the Day of the Lord will be a believing and delivered nation of Israel (30:8-31:30). It is after these significant events take place that the new covenant will be made with Israel. When considering these contextual markers, it is clear that this event is in the eschatological future.

The third observation is the parties to the covenant are the “house of Israel” and the “house of Judah”. With God as the granting party in this covenant, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah are the recipients. Interestingly, when the covenant begins to be elaborated in verse 33 only the house of Israel is mentioned. This could be indication that at the time of this new covenant will be in tandem with the fulfillment of the divided kingdoms being united again as prophesied in Ezekiel 37.

The fourth observation is that this covenant is different from the covenant God previously made with “their fathers”. The new covenant will be distinct from a past covenant made with Israel. The pool of eligible covenant’s being referenced here are two. The first eligible covenant is the land covenant which is described in the entire book of Deuteronomy, but specifically mentioned in Deuteronomy 29:1. The land covenant was a national agreement to obey the commands of the Lord and as a result receive blessing. Additionally, any disobedience to the commands of the Lord results in cursing.

There are three points that build a case for the land covenant being what Jeremiah is referencing in 31:32. The first point is that the land covenant relates to the law. The majority portion of the book of Deuteronomy is a repeat of the Mosaic law. The second point is that this covenant was broken as Jeremiah mentions in verse 32. The third point is that the covenant was made with a generation of Israel that was led out of Egypt by the Lord (cf. 32). Despite these points there are some observations that poke holes in the above arguments. First, though the land covenant was broken by Israel, it remains a sub-covenant to the Abrahamic covenant. This makes the land covenant unconditional in nature and not subject to national loss of the land but simply generational loss of the land. Another potential hole in the above arguments is that the generation that entered into the land covenant was indeed a generation that left Egypt, but it was the children of those that departed. After wandering the wilderness, the parent generation died as a consequence of their unbelief and their children entered the land. This second generation were the recipients of the land covenant.

Therefore, it seems best to see the old covenant that is distinct from the new covenant in Jeremiah 31 as the Mosaic covenant made at Sinai and not the land covenant. There are four arguments favoring this view. First, the Mosaic covenant is obviously connected with the law. This is obviously because it IS the law. Second, this covenant was broken and broken often. Third, the Mosaic covenant was designed to sanctify the chosen nation of Israel setting them apart from the other nations (Ex. 19:1-6). This is significant in the eschatological context of the new covenant, where Israel again is set apart from the Gentile nations. Finally, the Mosaic covenant is communicated as a marital contract between a nation and their God by the language of national harlotry (Ex. 34:10-16). This fits well with the words in Jeremiah 31:32 “though I was a husband to them”.

This passage in Jeremiah does not speak to anything directly related to the Church. However, there is a principle that is mentioned by Walter Kaiser Jr. that depicts a beautiful fact about God that remains true in every dispensation. He says “The same nation that had previously broken a divinely ordained covenant is now offered a renewal of that covenant with many of the same features and more.”³ This statement adequately summarizes the grace of God at work in His dealings with mankind. His long suffering that is applied to the nation of Israel is the very same that is applied to the Church. It also shows that God’s intentions for His people whether Israel or the Church is always for their ultimate good.

Part 2: Description of the New Covenant vv. 33-34

The second part to this passage on the new covenant describes this covenant which is said to be distinct from the Mosaic covenant. There are eight descriptions to the new covenant made with Israel. There appears to be a parallel nature to the way that Jeremiah lists these eight descriptions where they are grouped in twos. The first description is that God will put His law “within Israel” (v.33 NASB). The second description is similar if not synonymous in the statement “and write it on their hearts”. This writer thinks that the two phrases are similar for emphatic purposes, yet with the contrast of this new covenant with the old mosaic covenant the law being written on the Jewish heart is interesting. The old covenant was written on stone and preserved in the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:16). The new covenant will be written on the heart and preserved within the descendants of Israel.

The third description of the new covenant is that God will be their God. This description communicates the return of the nation of Israel back to true worship that was intended to be

³ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “*The Old Promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-34*,”

handed down from their fathers. The law being placed within them will result in perfect fellowship with God that will not be subject to lapses or revocation. Now, the fourth is parallel to the third but is in mirror form. As God will be their God, it is revealed also that “they shall be My people” (v. 33). These descriptions carry heavy prophetic significance with what is revealed by the prophet Hosea. Hosea chapter 1 verse 9 reveals God telling Hosea to name his son “Lo-Ammi” meaning not my people. God explains “for you are not My people, and I will not be your God.” Lest someone be tempted to say that this proves God can and has cast off His chosen nation of Israel, observe the transition in verse 10. “Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea which cannot be measured or numbered. And it shall come to pass in the place where it is said to them, ‘you are not My people’ there it shall be said to them, ‘you are the sons of the living God.’” The clear prophetic message is that God is going to not only restore Israel to the land as a reunited kingdom, but at that time He will make the new covenant with them.

The fifth and sixth description are related to knowledge of God. Verse 34 says “no more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying ‘know the Lord,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.” These descriptive markers reveal that within the Jewish family, knowledge of God will be established to the extent that no need for teaching neighbor or brother will be required. This description of established knowledge of God within Israel has two connections. First, inwardly, this description reveals that Israel will fulfill their ultimate purpose of being a set apart nation that enjoys communion with their Creator. Outwardly, this description reveals that Israel will be in the position to be a witness to the Gentile nations during the time that this new covenant takes its effect during the 1,000 year kingdom. Zechariah 8:22-23 says “Yes, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the

Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the Lord. Thus says the Lord of host: ‘In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, “Let us go with you, or we have heard that God is with you.”’”

The final two descriptions relate to the sin of the nation of Israel. The last part of verse 34 says “For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” The description of forgiveness has to do with the pardoning of Israel for their sin. While the second part reveals that God will not remember their sin. More specifically, God will choose to not recall their sin because it is no longer of consequence.

In concluding the second part to this wonderful passage the previous two descriptions regarding the forgiveness of sins, introduces the need to clarify the new covenant’s relationship to salvation. An extended quotation by Roy Beacham well summarizes the distinction. He says,

“While the prophets clearly predict that all Israel will be saved at the time of God’s ratification of the new covenant with that nation, Israel is not saved by the new covenant, nor is the new covenant God’s all-encompassing and timeless covenant of salvation. The new covenant itself does not provide salvation either to mankind or to Israel, nor does God dispense salvation to mankind through the new covenant. God provides salvation to all of mankind, including Israel, through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ, not through a covenant. God dispenses salvation to all of mankind, including Israel, by grace through faith, not through the new covenant. In the new covenant, God promises, among other things, national salvation to all of the people of Israel in the eschaton. That is different, however, from promising individual salvation to all men of all time who come to

God in faith. The two should not be confused. The new covenant is not a soteriological agreement contracted with the church or with the redeemed of all time.”⁴

Part 3: Security of the New Covenant vv. 35-37

In the third and final part to this passage on the new covenant God asks two questions and draw’s essentially the same ultimate conclusion. The first question is stated in verse 35. God asks, “who give the sun for a light by day, the ordinances for the moon and the stars for a light by night”. This question points back to God’s creative act in Genesis 1:14-18 where God created lights to rule the day and to rule the night. The implication to this question is that God is sovereign Creator. Perhaps, what is also intended is to convey that God is God over the heavens, while the next question conveys that God is God over the land and the sea.

The second question is in the second part of verse 34 where God continues His question, “who disturbs the sea, and its waves roar”. God answer’s these questions Himself in saying “the Lord of hosts is His name.” Now this second question is related to the first in that it was an act done by God at the time of creation. The Hebrew word that is translated “disturbs” is elsewhere translated as divided. In fact, the King James translation and the Authorized English Version use the translation “divided.”⁵ Now the language of dividing the sea poses an interesting possibility that this is a reference to the mighty act of God in parting the waters so that the people of Israel could flee the pursuing Egyptian army. Whichever view is accepted, the point seems unmistakably related to the sovereign might of the Creator over His creation.

⁴ Roy Beacham, *Dispensational understanding of the New Covenant* (pg. 110-111)

⁵ KJV and AV 1873 (Jer. 31:35)

Now the conclusion that is drawn from these two questions is set forth in verses 36 and 37. God emphatically states, “If those ordinances depart from before Me, says the lord, then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before Me forever.’ Thus says the Lord: ‘if heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off all the seed of Israel for all that they have done, says the Lord.” To summarize, if the ordinance of light governing the day and the night should stop, then the descendants of Israel will likewise stop. The second promise is, if heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched, then God will cast off the descendants of Israel. These challenges are stated in such a way to emphasize the absolute security of Israel’s new covenant with God. Since, God alone can alter the ordinances, measure the heavens, and search the foundations of the earth the future hope of Israel is certain. Israel’s future hope in the new covenant is as sure as God’s sovereignty. Additionally, Israel is a part of the category of creation which God is distinguishing Himself from as the Creator of all creation. Therefore, Israel’s hope rests solely on God and no individual or nation.

Conclusion

Jeremiah is often seen as the emotional prophet. But given the circumstances of his prophetic ministry and the powerful prophecies received through him it is easy to sympathize with him. It has been shown that Jeremiah ministered during an immensely dramatic moment in Israel’s history. In this beautiful passage that reveals the new covenant that God makes with Israel It cannot and should not be missed that this future hope of Israel was provided to them before their plunge into the dark world of the “time of the Gentiles”. The surety of this covenant

is placed on the shoulders of God alone and awaits fulfillment after the nation of Israel finally turns to their Messiah and trusts in Him. The solemn event that will bring this return to God is the Day of the Lord. Where God will punish the earth and discipline the nation of Israel (cf. Rev. 6-19). In an astonishing parallel the judgments that will be poured out during the Day of the Lord bear resemblance to those that were poured out during the Exodus. History will have a repeat of the glorious hand of God defending His people and leading them to the land that was promised to their father Abraham. It is there that they will finally experience everything God intended for them.

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