

The Old Promise And The New Covenant:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

Associate Professor of Old Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Bannock-burn, Deerfield, Illinois.

One of the most important, yet most sensitive of all theological texts, is the new covenant theme of Jeremiah 31:31–34. Hardly has the exegesis of this passage begun when the interpreter discovers to his great delight and consternation that he is involved in some of the greatest theological questions of our day. No matter what he says, some evangelicals are bound to be scandalized because of their commitments either to a covenantal or dispensational understanding of theology. Nevertheless, the issues are too exciting and the passage is too important for a simple retreat to past theological battlelines. For one thing, God's action in historical events has made the contemporary evangelical too responsible and blameworthy for him to simply repeat the previous generation's theology. For another, too many excellent points have been made by both of the current evangelical schools of interpretation to abandon the attempt for a reproachment.

The Issues At Stake

The time is now ripe for evangelical scholarship to restate for our age our credos on the following relationships: (1) the amount of continuity and discontinuity between the two testaments, (2) the separate and/or identical parts played by Israel and the Church in the composition of the people and purpose of God in the past and the future, and (3) the crucial importance of authorial will, i.e., the truth as intended by the writers of Scripture as a basis for resolving the present stalemate on a hermeneutical stance and a Biblical philosophy of history. This latter question is handled so brilliantly in its basic theoretical argumentation by E. D. Hirsch¹ that no attempt will be made to repeat his invincible arguments here. Evangelicals would be well advised to study this volume carefully and then apply its insights to such debate-able areas as eschatological hermeneutics.² The other two questions however, will be features in the ensuing discussion.

The Old Promise

The promise of God is one of the greatest unifying themes running throughout the various books of the Bible and binding them into one organic whole.³ Interesting enough, the Old Testament itself possessed no single, special word to designate the idea of "promise"; rather it has a series of rather ordinary words: *dibber*, "to speak";⁴ *amar*, "to say";⁵ *sabac*, "to swear"; *sebuchah*,

¹ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967.

² See the writer's paper "The Eschatological Hermeneutics of 'Evangelicalism': Promise Theology" *JETS*, XIII (1970), 91–99.

³ See Foster R. McCurley, Jr., "The Christian and the O.T. Promise," *Lutheran Quarterly*. XXII (1970), pp. 401-10 for the most recent exploration of this theme. Also F. C. Fensham, "Covenant, Promise and Expectation in the Bible," *Theologische Zeitschrift*. XXIII (1967), pp. 305-22. And Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., "The Covenant with Abraham and Its Historical Setting," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 127 (1970), pp. 241-56.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 402, n. 2. McCurley counts over 30 cases of *dibber* as "promise." The Promised (*dibber*) items include: (1) the land: Ex. 12:25; Deut. 9:28; 12:20; 19:8; 27:3; Jos. 23:5, 10; (2) blessing: Deut. 1:11; 15:6; (3) multiplication of his possession: Deut. 6:3; 26:18; (4) rest: Jos. 22:4; I Kings 8:56; (5) all good things promised: Jos. 23:15; and (6) a dynasty of David's throne: II Sam. 7:28; I Kings 2:24; 8:20, 24, 25, 56; 9:5; I Chron. 17:26; II Chron. 6:15, 16; Jer. 33:14. As a "Promise" (*daber*) it appears in I Kings 8:50; Psa. 105:42.

The Old Promise And The New Covenant:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

“oath”;⁶ *berakah*, blessing”;⁷ and *menuhah*, “rest.”⁸ When these words have God as their subject and his chosen people as the recipients of the divine word, action, or person, they are properly translated as “promise” or connected with the promise theme. In addition to these terms, there are repeated formulas which epitomize the content of the promise, e.g., the gospel itself is the heart of the promise: “In your seed, all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.”⁹ Another is the tripartite formula, “I will be your God, you shall be my special possession and I will dwell (*sakan*) in the midst of you.”¹⁰

Contrary to most current exposition and thinking, the promise is actually God’s single *all* encompassing declaration which is repeated, unfolded and ultimately completed “in that day” of our Lord. Highlights of this single promise can be located in the *proto-evangelium* of Genesis 3:15, the Abrahamic covenant of Genesis 12:1–3, the Davidic covenant of II Samuel 7¹¹ and the new covenant of Jeremiah 31; but under no condition must these predictions and actualizations of the promise be scattered into many separate disconnected Messianic prophecies. Willis J. Beecher’s work, still the best commentary on this general theme, is at pains to make just this point.¹²

The New Testament has more than forty references to the promise and uses the technical term *epaggelia*, and its cognates *epaggelma* and *epaggelomai*. In Luke-Acts, the promise is still the same one made with Abraham and his seed (Acts 7:5, 17; 26:6–7). In his ten references to the “promise,” Luke centers on the work of the risen Lord (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4; 2:33) and the Holy Spirit (Acts: 1:5; 2:33).

Paul’s letters also refer the promise back to Abraham (Gal. 3:16, 19), but Paul also carries it way beyond Abraham’s day to include not only the present offer of the gospel in our age (Gal. 3:8; Rom. 4:20–21), but even to the “inheritance of the world” at the conclusion of this age (Rom. 4:13)—the Holy Spirit being God’s downpayment and guarantee of this inheritance “until we acquire possession of it” (Eph. 1:14). Amazingly, Paul repeats the same tripartite formula so frequently cited by the Old Testament in II Corinthians 6:16, i.e., “I will dwell among them ...

⁵ *Ibid.* about 7 cases; e.g. Num. 14:40; II Kings 8:19; Psa. 77:8; Neh. 9:15, 23; II Chron. 21:7.

⁶ Gen. 26:3; Deut. 8:7; I Chron. 10:15–18; Psa. 105:9; Jer. 11:5. See Gene M. Tucker, “Covenant Forms and Contract Forms,” *Vetus Testamentum* XV. (1965), pp. 487-503 for use of “oath” with the promise.

⁷ Gen. 12:1–3 *et passim*.

⁸ Gen. 49:15; Deut. 12:9; I Kings 8:50; I Chron. 22:9; 28:2; Psa. 95:11; 132:8, 14; Isa. 11:10; 28:12; 66:1; Jer. 45:3; Mic. 2:10; Zech. 9:1.

⁹ Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14. cf. Paul’s estimate of this in Gal. 3:8 and Norman C. Habel, “The Gospel Promise to Abraham,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*. (1969), pp. 346-55.

¹⁰ Gen. 17:7, 8; 28:21; Ex. 6:7; 29:45; Lev. 11:45; 22:33; 25:38; 26:12, 44, 45; Num. 15:41; Deut. 4:20; 29:12–13; etc. Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:1; 31:33; 32:38; Ezek. 11:20; 14:11; 30:28; 37:27; Zech. 8:8; 13:9.

¹¹ Otto Eissfeldt, “The Promises of Graco to David in Isaiah 55:1–5,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage* (ed. Bernard W. Anderson), pp. 196-207.

¹² Willis J. Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1963 (r.p. of 1905 Thomas Crowell publication), pp. 175-85. He fails to make the previous point, i.e. the connection of the promise of the land and nation with the events of the second advent of Christ. See also the fine article by Paul S. Minear, “Promise,” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* III, Nashville; Abingdon Press, 1962, pp. 893-96.

The Old Promise And The New Covenant:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

and I will be their God and they shall be my people.” This formula, he contends, is part of the “promise” and he claims that these realities are now being fulfilled among believers in II Corinthians 7:1 .

Hebrews also makes the promise the center of its message of grace and hope in some 18 references (Heb. 6:17–18). More: importantly this book “notes the difference between receiving *the promise* and receiving *what is promised*. In receiving the promise, recipients are declared heirs; in receiving what is promised, they obtain their inheritance”¹³ (Heb. 9:15). Therefore the promise is one continuous, unfolding declaration consummated not only in the arrival, death and resurrection of Christ, or even in the spiritual seed now receiving the gospel which previously evangelized Abraham (Gal. 3:8); but as the general epistles declare, this single promise will only reach its most glorious realization when we “abide in the Son and in the Father (I John 2:24) and “eternal life” is fully realized. It reaches to the second coming of Christ (II Peter 3:4, 9–10), to our receiving “the crown of Life” (I John 2:5), and even on into the enjoyment of “the new heavens and the new earth” (II Peter 3:13). Finally, as John concludes the book of Revelation by describing the new heavens and the new earth, he hears the tripartite formula once more: “God shall dwell with them, they shall be his people and he shall be their God who is always with them” (Rev. 21:3). This single promise is so unified, yet so all encompassing in its numerous specifications and span of time, that it must be reexamined as the Bible’s own key category for theological organization.

Covenant theologians have stressed the covenant form rather than the total promise content of those covenants; therefore the emphasis has fallen on the church’s present reception of *the promise as* God’s new Israel. Dispensationalists on the other hand, have stressed the ultimate reception of *what is promised*; therefore the emphasis has fallen on Israel’s inheritance of the land and the kingdom of God. Obviously, both are pointing to valid Biblical teaching found in the single promise spanning both testaments. If reproachment is that close, let us investigate the possible connections the Scripture makes between this old promise and Jeremiah’s new covenant.

The New Covenant

The only place in the Old Testament where the expression “new covenant” occurs is Jeremiah 31:31. However it would appear that the idea is much more widespread. Based on similar content and contexts, the following expressions can be equated with the new covenant: the “everlasting covenant” in seven passages,¹⁴ a “new heart” or a “new spirit” in three or four passages,¹⁵ the “covenant of peace” in three passages,¹⁶ and “a covenant” or “my covenant” which is placed “in

¹³ Paul S. Minear. *Ibid.*, p. 895. (italics ours).

¹⁴ Jer. 32:40; 50:5; Ezek. 16:60; 37:26; Isa. 24:5; 55:3; 61:8.

¹⁵ Ezek. 11:19; 18:31; 36:26; Jer. 32:39 (LXX).

¹⁶ Isa. 54:10; Ezek. 34:25; 37:26.

The Old Promise And The New Covenant:
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

that day” in three passages¹⁷—making a grand total of sixteen or seventeen major passages on the new covenant.

Still, Jeremiah 31:34 is the *locus classicus* on the subject. This may be validated from several lines of evidence. Firstly, the unique appearance of the word “new” in this passage stimulated Origen to be the first to name the last 27 books of the Bible “The New Testament.”¹⁸ Secondly, it was the largest piece of text to be quoted *in extenso* in the New Testament—Hebrews 8:8–12. The writer of Hebrews even partially repeats the same long quotation a few chapters later in 10:16–17. Thirdly, it was the subject of nine other New Testament texts: four dealing with the Lord’s Supper,¹⁹ three additional references in Hebrews²⁰ and two passages in Paul dealing with “ministers of the new covenant” and the future forgiveness of Israel’s sins.²¹ Again, we are presented with another important Biblical theme which promises to unify the two testaments. This is the theme we now wish to explore.

The Book Of Comfort: Jeremiah 30-33

Probably the best analysis of the first half of Jeremiah’s little book of comfort is the work by Charles Briggs. Observing the introductory formula of “thus says the Lord” and its expansion, he divided chapters 30–31 into six strophes. The resulting topics and sections are: (1) The time of Jacob’s trouble, 30:1–11; (2) The healing of the incurable wound, 30:12–31:6; (3) Ephraim, God’s firstborn, 31:7–14; (4) Rachel weeping for her children, 31:15–22; (5) The restoration of Israel in Judah and the new covenant, 31:23–34; and (6) God’s inviolable covenant with the nation Israel, 31:35–40.²² The whole context meticulously connects the new covenant strophe with a literal restoration of the Jewish nation. This includes not only the larger context of these six strophes and the second half of the “Book of Comfort” (Jer. 32–33), but also the immediate context of Jeremiah 31:27–28 and 31:35–36. On this point almost all commentators are agreed; at least initially so.

The Persons Addressed In The New Covenant

Just as the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants were made directly with each of these men, so the new covenant was made with all the house of Israel and the whole house of Judah. Putting it in this form may open up some new paths for discussion, for while there seems to be no argument

¹⁷ Isa. 42:6; 49–8; Hos. 2:18–20; Isa. 59:21. For additional passages on the new covenant see Stefan Porubcan, *Sin in the Old Testament: A Soteriological Study*. Rome: Slovak Institute, 1963, pp. 481-512.

¹⁸ T. H. Home, *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*. I, p. 37. Also Gerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdoans, 1954, p. 321 for a similar assessment. Also Albertus Pieters, *The Seed of Abraham*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950, p. 61.

¹⁹ Luke 22:20; I Cor. 11:25; Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24.

²⁰ Heb. 9:15; 10:13; 12:24.

²¹ II Cor. 3:6; Rom. 11:27.

²² Charles A. Briggs, *Messianic Prophecy*. New York: Scribners, 1889, pp. 246-57. The same outline was essentially repeated in Geo. H. Cramer, “Messianic Hope in Jeremiah,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1958), pp. 237-46.

The Old Promise And The New Covenant:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

over who was originally addressed, there is everything but a consensus when it comes to identifying who participates in the benefits of all three covenants.

But haven't the dispensationalists conceded a point when they agree that the Christian's gospel and the Christian's spiritual seed were both announced in the Abrahamic covenant (e.g., Gal. 2:8, 29).²³

So also should the covenant theologians concede the point that it is too late in history to be arguing over whether God will restore a national Israel or not. There are just too many historical events and too many explicit texts (some well beyond the Babylonian Exile, e.g., Zech. 10:8–12; Rom. 9–11) to shut the door on a revived Israelite nation thesis. Indeed, there are some real signs of encouragement that this subject is also open for renegotiation by many covenant theologians.²⁴

With just this much concession on either side, the way would be opened for the synthesis provided us in two great works: The aforementioned Willis J. Beecher's work²⁵ on the promise doctrine and George N.H. Peter's *Theocratic Kingdom*.²⁶ Peter demonstrates that: "... We have decided references to... [a] renewed Abrahamic covenant, conjoined with the Dayidic [as] being a distinguishing characteristic of, and fundamental to, the Messianic period, e.g., Micah 7:19–20; Ezekiel 16:60–63; Isaiah 55:3; etc."²⁷ Further he argues that: "The decided and impressive testimony of (the)...early fathers ... [was] that they were living under this *renewed* Abrahamic covenant as the seed of Abraham [by adoption and engrafting into the covenanted elect nation], which the death and exaltation of Jesus ensured to them of finally realizing in the inheriting of the land with Abraham."²⁸

²³ When Charles Ryrie comments on the new covenant, he says "The occurrences of the term *New Covenant* in the New Testament shows that there is a wider meaning than to Israel alone. Some of the blessings of the new covenant with Israel are blessings which we enjoy now as members of the body of Christ." *The Basis of Premillennial Faith*. New York: Loizeaux Bro., 1953, p. 124. Again Ryrie says in *Dispensationalism Today*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1965, p. 145-46: "If our concept of the Kingdom were as broad as it appears to be in Scriptures and our definitions of the Church as strict as it is in the Scriptures, perhaps non-dispensationalists would cease trying to equate the Church with the Kingdom and dispensationalists would speak more of the relationship between the two." We agree wholeheartedly and urge this state of affairs to begin immediately.

²⁴ Henrikus Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966, pp. 136-53. "At any rate, with the surprising geographical and political fact of the establishment of the state of Israel, the moment has come to begin to watch for political and geographical elements in God's activities, which we have not wanted to do in our Western dualism, docetism and spiritualism." (p. 153) Cf. also John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*. (NIC) II, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965, pp. 65-100. Commenting on Romans 11:27 he concludes, "Thus the effect is that the future restoration of Israel is certified by nothing less than the certainty belonging to covenantal institution." (p. 100) In a footnote on that page he observes, "It is worthy to note that although Paul distinguishes between Israel and Israel, seed and seed, Children and children, (cf. 9:6–13) he does not make this discrimination in terms of 'covenant' so as to distinguish between those who are in the covenant in the broader sense and those who are actual partakers of its grace." The older view may be found in Albertus Pieters, *The Prophetic Prospects of the Jews, or Fairbairn vs. Fairbairn*: 1930. For the older literature on the subject consult David Brown, *The Restoration of the Jews: The History, Principles and Bearings of the Question*. Edinburgh, 1861.

²⁵ Willis J. Beecher. *op cit*. See this writer's *JETS* paper cited in n. 2 for an enthusiastic endorsement of his main thesis.

²⁶ George N. G. Peters. *The Theocratic Kingdom I*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1957.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 324 (italics his). The fathers he has in mind are chiefly Barnabas, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, etc.

The Old Promise And The New Covenant:
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

Here is a new footing for an old stalemate. The new covenant is indeed addressed to a revived national Israel of the future, but nonetheless by virtue of its specific linkage with the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants and promises contained in all of them, it is therefore proper to speak of gentile participation. Under the promise doctrine, they were to be the seed of Abraham. They would be adopted and grafted into God's covenant nation Israel.²⁹ The hope of their final inheritance stood or fell with Israel's reception of the land and the kingdom. But what of the new covenant? Did it change all of this: the text itself must now be investigated.

The Renewed Covenant

The most frequent title given to the new covenant in the Old Testament is the "everlasting covenant."³⁰ It was a ratification of the "sure-mercies of David" (Isa. 55:3) and of God's covenant made with Israel "in the day of Israel's youth," i.e., with patriarchs (Ezek. 16:60). Perhaps the key texts connecting the "everlasting covenant" with the future "covenant of peace" made with nature and with such contents of the Jeremiah's covenant as "I will be their God and they shall be my people" are Ezekiel 37:26–27 and Jeremiah 32:38–42. These old promises are restated anew for a nation on the brink of national disaster and extinction. Notice then its continuity with the past.

Calvin did not miss this point when he commented on Ezekiel 16:61, for he called the "everlasting covenant" a "renewed covenant" and concluded by saying "that the new covenant so flowed from the old, that it was almost the same in substance while distinguished in form."³¹ Still some are apt to be misled by Jeremiah's use of the word "new." They will, therefore, deny that this is the same promise doctrine announced to Abraham, reiterated and enlarged for David. But Biblical usage must supply our definition here also. Both Hebrew *hadash* and Greek *kainos* frequently mean "to renew" or "to restore," as in the "new commandment," (which is actually an old one)³² the "new moon," the "new creature in Christ," the "new heart," and the "new heavens and new earth."³³

While the exact distinction between *kainos* and *neos* is often contested, the discussion in Kittel's *TDNT* appears convincing. *Neos* refers to something brand new or distinctive in time or origin, often lacking maturity. *Kainos*, on the other hand, refers to what is new in nature, better than the

²⁹ Refer to the above discussion on the old promise and the conclusion of this paper.

³⁰ See above n. 14.

³¹ See Marten H. Woustra's fine recent article. Obviously this very question troubles Woustra greatly as he tries to decide between Calvin and C. Charles Aalders in "The Everlasting Covenant in Ezekiel 16:59–63," *Calvin Theological Journal*. VI (1971), pp. 22-48.

³² Cf. John 13:34; I John 2:7; II John 5.

³³ Cf. those verses where the perpetuity of the heaven and earth is taught: Psa. 104:5; 148:3–6; 89:34–36; Jer. 31:35–36. See Wilbur M. Smith's thoughtful comments in the *Biblical Doctrine of Heaven*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1968. Chap. XIII, "New Heaven and a New Earth," pp. 223-38.

The Old Promise And The New Covenant:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

old or superior in value or attraction.³⁴ The Hebrew word, however, must serve both ideas: new in time and renewed in nature. Thus for Jeremiah 31, the context, content and New Testament vocabulary distinction decides in favor of a “renewed covenant.”³⁵

The Contrast With The Mosaic Covenant

Jeremiah 31:32 explicitly contrasts the new covenant with an old covenant made during the era of the Exodus. However, both Jeremiah and the writer of Hebrews are emphatic in their assessment of the trouble with the old covenant made in Moses’ day: it was with the people, not with the covenant-making God, nor with the moral law or promises reaffirmed from the patriarchs and included in that old covenant. Jeremiah 31:39, specifically says “which covenant of mine, they broke.” And so is Hebrews explicit on the matter: “...finding fault with them...because they continued not in (his) covenant.” (Heb. 8:8–9)

Was the Mosaic covenant conditioned on the people’s obedience for fulfillment and all the other covenants unconditional as dispensationalists claim? Or were all the covenants conditioned on obedience and consequently, as covenant theologians claim, the Jewish aspect of the covenants is obviously to be deleted since Israel failed to obey?³⁶ But this may all be just a semantical battle. The word *heperu*, “they brake,” also occurs in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:14, “the uncircumcised man ...shall be cut off; he hath broken (*heper*) my covenant.”³⁷ Even the eternal, irrevocable covenant with David contained some qualifications which allowed for *individual* invalidation, frustration, or destruction of the benefits of that covenant, e.g., I Chronicles 22:13; 28:7; Psalm 132:12. Obedience was no more an optional feature for a genuine trust in the promise or gospel in that day than it is in ours today. But neither was individual rejection or breaking of the covenant a sign that God’s purpose had been frustrated and stopped.³⁸ Jeremiah 31:35–37 argued that the stars would fall out of the sky and the planets would spin out of their orbits before God would abandon his pledge to the nation of Israel!

³⁴ Johannas Behm, “Kainos,” in *TDNT*. (ed. by Gerhard Kittel and translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley) III, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965. p. 447. The suggested etymology for *neos* is an Indo-European word from the adverb *nu*, “now, of the moment.” *Kainos* is probably from a root *ken* “freshly come, or begun.” Notice while the aspect of *kind* of newness is stressed in our word *kainos*, the aspect of time is also present. Bernard S. Childs in *Myth and Reality in the O.T.* (2nd ed.). Naperville: SCM, 1962, p. 77, stresses that *hadassu* is cognate to Semitic roots like Akkadian *edesu* meaning “to restore” ruined altars or cities.

³⁵ Only in Heb. 12:24 is *neos* used of the covenant to stress the recent mediation of Christ’s death as a surety for the new covenant. Hence it was recent in time.

³⁶ Notice the crucial importance of this feature in dispensationalism in Charles Ryrie, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-61 and the strong disavowal in O. T. Allis *Prophecy and the Church*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co., 1945, pp. 31-48. See George N.H. Peters, *op. cit.*, I, p. 176. See the distinction between obligatory types (Sinai covenant) and promissory types (Abrahamic and Davidic covenants) by M. Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the O.T. and in the Ancient Near East,” *Journal of American Oriental Society*, XC (1970), pp. 184-203. The “royal grant” treaties of the Ancient Near East with its gift of land and dynasty are the models for the promissory form. If sustained, this will open new avenues of conversation with covenantal theologians.

³⁷ As pointed out by Marten Woudstra, *op. cit.*, p. 28 (cf. Lev. 26:15, Jer. 11:10 to Ezek. 16:59.)

³⁸ See the writer’s discussion, “Leviticus 18:5 and Paul: Do this and You Shall Live (Eternally?) ,” *JETS*, XIV (1971), pp. 21-24, especially n. 27.

The Old Promise And The New Covenant:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

Covenant theologians have properly emphasized the Biblical role of the “obedience of faith” which follows all genuine saving faith, but they have erred when they pressed the case for the conditionality of all of God’s covenants as the condition for divine fulfillment of them especially in the sensitive area of national Israel’s future.³⁹ It confuses the determined, sovereign will and on-going purpose of the Promising God with the individual participation in that will in any given time or age.

On the other hand, dispensationalists stressed the unconditionality of the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants which emphasis from the standpoint of the sovereign purpose was more than justified; but it failed to account for that Biblical human responsibility which was attached to these covenants. Since the “if” of individual participation was so clear in the case of the Mosaic covenant, dispensationalists wrongly isolated and lowered it below the other covenants. That covenant is lower, but only because of its planned obsolescence; not because it asked for obedience as an evidence of real faith and love towards God.⁴⁰

The Contents Of The New Covenant

Now all of this discussion is what makes the new covenant so important; for one of its most perplexing features is that almost all of the items mentioned in Jeremiah’s new covenant are but a repetition of some aspect of the promise doctrine already known in the Old Testament.

The section begins with the eschatological formula so frequently seen in the Old Testament “Behold, the days are coming.” It concludes with a motive-clause which has divine forgiveness as the foundation of the covenant. According to Bernard W. Anderson’s excellent structural analysis of the passage the expression *ne’um yhwh*, “says the Lord,” appears four times to set forth the main structure of the unit; “twice in the first section: at its beginning (v. 31a), and at its end (v. 32b) and twice in the second section: at the beginning (v. 33a) and at the end (v. 34b). The latter occurrence sets off the climactic *ki* statement of v. 34e.⁴¹

³⁹ See Archibold Hughes, *A New Heaven and A New Earth*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co., 1958, pp. 115 ff. Also Martin J. Wyngaarden, *The Future of the Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfillment*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955, p. 133. He knows that Hebrews 6:17, 18 makes the Abrahamic covenant “immutable,” but he quickly restricts it to the promise of children, passing the promise of the holy land over to the Christians heavenly hope! Roderick Campbell, *Israel and the New Covenant*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co., 1954, pp. 199-205 uses the I Samuel 2:30, 35 (rejection of Eli’s family from the priesthood) and I Samuel 13:13-14 (rejection of Saul from everlasting kingdom) as texts which put limits on the *colam* of what would otherwise appear to be unconditional prophecies. Cf. Patrick Fairbairn, *Prophecy ...* 1856, (2nd ed.) Chap. IV and part I. But did God obliterate the priesthood or kingship in Israel? Wasn’t it only a question of who participated in it, not whether or not it was fulfilled?

⁴⁰ For a fuller discussion of this point, see the writer’s paper, “Leviticus 18:5 and Paul” *op. cit.* Subsequent to writing this article I discovered J. O. Buswell, Jr. *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962, pp. 314-20.

⁴¹ The New Covenant and the Old,” in the *O.T. and Christian Faith* (ed. by Bernhard W. Anderson), New York: Harper and Row, 1963, p. 230, n. 11. He also notes on p. 229 that “the particle *ki* is employed effectively to introduce the decisive moments in the movement of thought. The first in v. 33 is adversative and, the other two in v. 34 are climactic *ki* usages. For this climactic use he cites James Muilenburg, “The Linguistic and Rhetorical usage of the Particle *Ki* in the O.T.,” *HUCA*, XXXII (1961), pp. 135ff.

The Old Promise And The New Covenant:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

The items of continuity contained in the new covenant are: (1) the same covenant-making God (*beriti*), (2) the same law (*torati*), (3) the same divine fellowship (“I will be your God”), (4) the same seed (“You shall be my people”), and (5) the same forgiveness. Each of these items merits some further discussion and documentation.

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. There is a diversity of covenants in the Old Testament but one God and one promise doctrine throughout all of them. The kernel and essence of both the old and the new covenant was the law of the Lord.⁴² Even the Mosaic exposition of the law urged its placement in the heart of the believer (Deut. 6:6, 7; 10:12; 30:6). Indeed some Old Testament righteous men did claim that it was in their heart: “Thy law is within my heart,” Psalm 40:8 and Psalm 37:31; The difference seems to be a relative one only. There was no greater or more frequent formula for the promise doctrine than the declaration “I will be your God and you shall be my people.” As observed above, this theme of divine fellowship and special ownership is one of Israel’s most treasured concepts. But gentiles also now claim the same promise *verbatim* in II Corinthians 6:16. Again, the difference can only be in extent and degree, but not in kind.

Even God’s gracious forgiveness was experienced by the O.T. man. Not only did God announce himself at least eight times as “The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness... forgiving iniquity and transgressions and sins,”⁴³ but he forgave and forgot Israel’s sin as on the Day of Atonement⁴⁴ and in such great Psalms as 103, 32 and 51. Such is the scope of the continuity between the covenants.⁴⁵

But there are also items of discontinuity. Some of these are: (1) a universal knowledge of God (Jer. 31:34), (2) a universal peace in nature and in military hardware (Isa. 2:4; Ezek. 34:25; 37:26; Hos. 2:18), (3) a universal material prosperity (Isa. 61:8; Jer. 32:41; Ezek. 34:26–27; Hos. 2:22), (4) an age of the spirit and (5) a sanctuary to exist forever in the midst of Israel (Ezek. 37:26, 28).

These passages sound like the “all Israel” of Romans 11:26 and “every knee bowing” and “every tongue confessing” of Philippians 2:10–11. Jeremiah emphasizes the words “all of them” by

⁴² (C. F. Keil, *The Prophecies of Jeremiah*. II, Grand Rapids: Eerdrnans, 1956, pp. 38-39.

⁴³ Ex. 34:6, 7; Num. 14:18; Deut. 5:9, 10; Psa. 86:15; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:1; Jer. 34:18; Neh. 9:17.

⁴⁴ Henry Melvill, *The Golden Lectures: Forty-Six Sermons delivered at St. Margaret’s Church, Lothbury on Tuesday Mornings from January 1 to December 23, 1856*. London: James Paul. The sermon delivered on March 18, 1956 entitled “The Jewish and Christian Sacrifices” is an excellent exposition of Leviticus 16. One of the most stimulating discussions on this general subject to recently appear from an evangelical pen is that by Geoffrey W. Grogan. “The Experience of Salvation in the Old and New Testaments, *Vex Evangelica*, (ed. Donald Guthrie), 1967, pp. 4-26.

⁴⁵ So great is the continuity factor that Wilber B. Wallis believes Jeremiah is using an ironical figure of speech when he calls it a new covenant: “Irony in Jeremiah’s Prophecy of the New Covenant.” *JETS* XII (1969), p. 107-110.

The Old Promise And The New Covenant:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

placing it first in the Hebrew clause and by the expression “from the most insignificant of them unto the greatest of them they all shall know me.”⁴⁶

Then too the full realization of the tripartite promise formula is only totally realized in the *eschaton*, for a great voice out of heaven cries in Revelation 21:3, “Behold the tabernacle (remember O.T. *sakan*?) is with men and he will dwell with them and they shall be his people and God himself shall be with them and be their God.”

We conclude that the new covenant is a continuation of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants with the same single, promise doctrine sustained in them all. No features have been deleted except the ceremonies and ordinances of the “old” Mosaic covenant whose phasing out was planned for long ago. The better covenant remained.

The Better Covenant: The Abrahamic-Davidic-New Covenant

The key to understanding the “better covenant” of Hebrews 8:6 is to observe the equation made between the Abrahamic promise (Heb. 6:13; 7:19, 22) and the new covenant (Heb. 8:6–13). The Abrahamic is not the first covenant according to that writer’s numbering, but a second better covenant since the Mosaic covenant was the first to be actualized and experienced by the nation. The Mosaic covenant did have its faults (Heb. 8:7), not because of a fault in the Covenant-making God, but because many of its provisions were deliberately built with a planned obsolescence. Its ceremonies and civil institutions were mere copies of the heavenly reality (Ex. 25:9; Heb. 9:23) and temporary teaching devices until the “surety” of the “better covenant” arrived. (Heb. 7:22).

Indeed the Sinaitic covenant was an outgrowth of the Abrahamic, yet since many of its provisions were merely preparatory, its place had to be yielded to the more enduring one now that Jesus had died. In fact, “God, willing more abundantly to show unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath.” Thus “by two immutable things (i.e., the promise and the oath) in which it was impossible for God to lie, we...have a strong consolation” (Heb. 6:17, 18). “These two immutable things are God’s original promise (Gen. 12:1–3 ...) and his solemn oath on Mount Moriah.”⁴⁷ Sinai could not eradicate these two things.

Some equate the person and work of Christ in this first advent with the sum and substance of new covenant, using such verses as Isaiah 42:6 and 49:8. Christ himself is a “covenant of the people” in the same sense as he is “a light to the gentiles” *viz.*, the source, mediator, or dispenser of light and so the mediator of the new covenant. By his death (the cup of the last supper), Jesus renews the covenant, but it is not an entirely new covenant.

⁴⁶ Jeremiah does not mean possessing intellectual data only, but in accordance with his usage in Jeremiah 22:15, 16 it is a knowledge which results in appropriate action and living. No doubt this is the explanation of the apparent contradiction of not needing teachers in Jeremiah 31:34 and the need for the Lord to teach in that day in Isaiah 2:3. No one will need to say “Get with it, don’t you know Yahweh is King.” All will know that and act accordingly!

⁴⁷ John J. Mitchell, “Abram’s Understanding of the Lord’s Covenant,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, XXXII (1969–70), p. 39. Cf. Gen 22:16–18.

The Old Promise And The New Covenant:
Jeremiah 31:31-34
Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

Neither is it a fulfilling of just the Spiritual promises made to Abraham's seed. The middle wall of partition has been broken down between believing Jews and believing Gentiles, but this says nothing about national destinies (Eph. 2:13–18). Paul says that gentile believers have become part of the “household of God” (Eph. 2:19) and of “Abraham’s seed” (Gal. 3:16–19). But, they also are to be “heirs” according to the promise (Gal. 3:19) with an “inheritance” to come which is “The hope of their calling” (Eph. 1:18)—even the “eternal inheritance” promised to Abraham (Heb. 9:15).⁴⁸ With Christ’s resurrection power shared with all of Abraham’s seed, it is now possible to eventually realize all the promises made to Abraham: geographical, political and spiritual. The first advent will climax in the second advent and all the promises made to Abraham will then be realized.⁴⁹

Conclusion

“It would appear that Hebrews does not warrant a radical break between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’...The Old Testament saints already participate in the New Age in anticipation even though in time they still belong to the old order... The ‘new’ is only different from the old in the sense of completion.”⁵⁰

The “new” began with the “old” promise made to Abraham and David. Its renewal perpetuated all of those promises previously offered by the Lord and now more. Therefore Christians presently participate in the new covenant⁵¹ now validated by the death of Christ. They participate

⁴⁸ “... He is the Mediator of the New Covenant, that by means of death...they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance” (Heb. 9:15). George N.H. Peters comments, “This promise, let the reader notice, of inheriting the land forever is found in the Abrahamic covenant.” *Op. Cit.* p. 322. Again on pp. 397-98 he comments: “We cannot too strongly insist upon *this necessary engrafting* of Gentile believers, so that by virtue of a *real relationship* they may inherit. For, it has become a great and radical *defect* in many, if not nearly all, of our systems of theology to overlook the reason *why* a seed must be raised up *unto* Abraham, and to proceed in their elucidations of the subject, as if Abraham and the Jews had very *little* to do with the matter. This is a very serious *fundamental* blunder, violating unity.” For support he cites Ephesians 2:12 passage about Gentiles being “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel” and “strangers from the covenants of promise” and in Ephesians 2:19 we were “strangers and foreigners, but now fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God.” In Ephesians 3:6 the believing Gentiles become “fellowheirs of the same body and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel.” Engrafting into the Jewish olive tree (Rein. 11:17–25) is necessary because “salvation is of the Jews (John 4:22) and since there is only one fold, and one shepherd, Jesus wishes to bring the “other sheep...which are not of this fold” (John 10:16). To see a stimulating, but ambivalent attempt to handle this question of the “New Inheritance,” consult Roderick Campbell’s chapter in *Israel and the New Covenant*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co., 1954, pp. 157-64. The best word study on the O.T. and N.T. words is by J. Herrmann in *The Theological Dictionary of The New Testament, III*, (ed. by G. Kittel and translated by G. W. Bromiley), pp. 769-76 and the same vol. by L. H. Foerster, pp. 781-85.

⁴⁹ See John Bright, “An Exercise in Hermeneutics: Jeremiah 31:31–34,” *Interpretation*, XX (1966), pp. 188-210; especially pp. 144, 195, 108.

⁵⁰ Jacob Jocz, *The Covenant: A Theology of Human Destiny*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968, p. 244. Also E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the O.T., II*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1872, pp. 424-45. On p. 433 he calls the difference between the old and the new ‘A relative one only, not an absolute one.’ On p. 432 he says, “The new covenant...is in substance the realization of the old.” John Calvin agrees also in his commentary on Jeremiah 31:31ff. “The substance remains the same.”

⁵¹ Most recent dispensationalists see two (!) new covenants in the N.T. This only avoids half of the truth to which the covenantal theologians are pointing. For exceptionally clear, but similarly worded statements cf. John Walvoord,

The Old Promise And The New Covenant:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

by a grafting process into the Jewish olive tree and thus continue God's single plan.⁵² However, in the midst of this unity of the "people of God" and "household of faith" there is an expectation of a future inheritance. The "hope of our calling" and the "inheritance" of the promise (in contradistinction to our present reception of the promise itself) awaits God's climactic work in history with a revived national Israel, Christ's second advent, his kingdom, and the heavens and the new earth. In that sense, the new covenant is still future and everlasting but in the former sense, we are already enjoying some of the benefits of the age to come.⁵³ With the death and resurrection of Christ the last days have already begun (Heb. 1:1), and God's grand plan as announced in the Abrahamic-Davidic-New Covenant continues to shape history, culture and theology.

"The New Covenant with Israel." *Bibliotheca Sacra* (1953), pp. 193-205; John Walvoord, "The New Covenant with Israel." *Bib. Sac.* (1946), pp. 16-27; Charles Ryrie, *Basis of Premillennial Faith*. New York: Loizeaux Press, 1953, pp. 105-125; Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964, pp. 116-28.

⁵² This is only to respect the authorial will in Romans 11. While we are in general agreement with the dispensationalist hermeneutic we cannot go as far as C. C. Ryrie goes in *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 154. "If the dispensational emphasis on the distinctiveness of the church seems to result in a dichotomy, let it stand as long as it is a result of a literal interpretation." This is to play Pentecost off against the promise and the engrafting process at the expense of the latter.

⁵³ See the delightful study of George Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959.