

The New Covenant Prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31-34 in Context

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Jeremiah 31:31–34 - “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. 33 “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 34 “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”²

In the historical context, Jeremiah consoles the people of Judah in the wake of judgment, destruction, and exile around the year 587 B.C.³ “The prophetic books of the OT are generally not linear and chronological texts, and thus attention to literary structure, patterns, and parallels is an important component in reading and interpreting these books.”⁴ The outline of Jeremiah is a chiasmus and the parallels place chs. 30-33 in the emphatic center:

- A Call and Narrative against Babylon (1)
- B Oracles against Judah (2-25)
- C Victorious Events in Jeremiah’s Life (26-29)
- D Book of Consolation (30-33)**
- C’ Defeating Events in Jeremiah’s Life (34-45)
- B’ Oracles against the Nations (46-51)
- A’ Narrative Concerning Babylon (52)⁵

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² New American Standard Bible, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. All citations will be from this version unless otherwise noted.

³ Holladay dates this, “in the autumn of 587, after the destruction of Jerusalem.” William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 26–52*, ed. Paul D. Hanson, vol. 24B of *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*. Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 197.

⁴ Gary Yates, “Narrative Parallelism and the ‘Jehoiakim Frame’: a Reading Strategy for Jeremiah 26-45.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 48/2 (June 2005), 281.

⁵ I have adapted Michael Kelly’s chiastic outline, available here: <http://revmarple.com/an-introduction-to-jeremiah/>, also see S.J. Murphy, *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July-September, 2009, pp. 306-18).

“The idea of a new covenant has been contained in all the prophecies of chs. 30-31 so far. Now it is spelt out (31-34).”⁶ The new covenant text (31:31-34) is a concentrated statement of the “Book of Consolation” (chs. 30-33). Repeatedly the Lord promises to “restore the fortunes” and bring His people back (29:14, 30:3, 30:18, 31:23, 32:44, 33:7, 33:11, 33:26). These words would begin to be fulfilled 70 years after the exile when Israel was permitted to go back and rebuild Jerusalem by Cyrus (Ezr. 1).

This consolation concentrates a number of deep themes in the book: “five oracles form a chiasm centered on 31:31–34”⁷ The parallels are as follows:

A - Rebuilding Jerusalem vv 23-26

B - Responsibility of Offspring vv 27-40

C - God to His People (again) vv 31-34

B' - Inclusion of Offspring vv 35-37

A' - Rebuilding Jerusalem vv 38-40⁸

The House of “Israel”

For short hand, I will use “Israel” to refer to the OT people of Yahweh. However, it is significant that Jeremiah frequently speaks of both Israel and Judah together, given the historical situation.⁹ He is consoling the entire *people of God*, firstly those in the exilic and post-exilic framework. The Jewish Study Bible observes, “The new covenant has been interpreted by Christians as a prophecy of the new covenant through Jesus (New Testament means new covenant), but here it refers to the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian exile and the reconstruction of the Temple.”¹⁰ The first recipients of this promise must be understood in the context of “a first fulfillment when God brings back

⁶ Gordon McConville, Jeremiah, ed. D. A. Carson et al., *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 695.

⁷ Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26–52*, vol. 27 of Word Biblical Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 126.

⁸ The descriptive titles here are mine. Keown, et al, say, “The first (vv 23–26) and fifth (vv 38–40) oracles are about Jerusalem. The second (vv 27–30) and fourth (vv 35–37) form a contrasting pair. The responsibility of each person for sin contrasts with God’s enduring commitment to the survival of Israel as a nation” (126).

⁹ E.g., Jeremiah 3:11 “Faithless Israel has proved herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.” In 3:18 there is a promise the unity of Israel and Judah. However, the northern kingdom by this time is no more and Israel and Judah were at war prior to that. It appears this looks forward to an eschatological reality not immediately possible.

¹⁰ Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael A. Fishbane, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible*. Accordance electronic ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), paragraph 6367.

the exiles in 539 BC and the following years.”¹¹ How Israel relates to the Christian Church is a subject for a different work.¹²

“Making” Covenant

God will make, literally “cut” (*karath*), a new covenant (*berith*) with Israel.¹³ Jeremiah uses the term “covenant” (*berith*) to refer to “the words of this covenant” (11:2) and the judgments of treaty violation, “I brought on them all the words of this covenant” (11:8, 34:18).¹⁴ Carl B. Hoch argues since this new covenant “replaces” the old, “the new covenant is also a suzerainty-vassal covenant. One would expect the new covenant to have a preamble, historical prologue, stipulations, and cursings and blessings formulae like the old covenant.”¹⁵ While I agree the new covenant includes stipulations for blessing as well as judgment, the concept of renewing, rather than replacing is more exegetically tenable. Judgments are not mentioned in 31:31-34 because the context is consolation. “The past will be evaded, for Yahweh will create a new covenantal regime impervious to the violation so often sustained by the old (31:31–34).”¹⁶ How God will accomplish this is not explained in 31:31-34, but this passage offers a striking contrast to the judgment due to Israel in the book of Jeremiah.

Covenantal Contrasts: Continuity and Discontinuity

Commentators are quick to note the discontinuity of the new covenant with previous administrations, since the language is intended to strike a contrast. “Discontinuity with the past is also emphasized by the adverbs ‘not like’ (v 32) and ‘not anymore’ (twice in v 34; cf 30:8; 31:12, 40).”¹⁷ What exactly is this discontinuity? Does it relate to the content promise (“I will be God to you”), the form (suzerainty-vassal with stipulations for blessing and judgment), the recipients (all Israel or an elect class within Israel), the

¹¹ McConville, 695.

¹² The NT indicates that God has made “one new humanity” from Jews and Gentiles in Christ (Eph. 2:15). Whatever one believes about the future of “ethnic Israel” in relation to fulfilling this prophecy, Paul says Christians participate in the “commonwealth of Israel” and in “the covenants of [the] promise” (*diathēkōn tēs epaggēlias*, Eph. 2:12ff). For more on this from my point of view, “The Land Promise: Exegetical Evidence for a Postmillennial Reading,” available at <http://www.wordmp3.com/details.aspx?id=3377>.

¹³ From a Christian view, this vivid word-picture prefigures the blood of the eternal covenant (Heb. 13:20). Christ institutes the Lord’s Supper, referring to this covenant in the words of the LXX, *kainos diatheke* (“new covenant”): “This cup which is poured out for you is *the new covenant* in My blood” (Lk. 22:20, 1 Cor. 11:25).

¹⁴ The apostolic instruction on the new covenant confirms that judgments are associated with it: “For he who eats and drinks, *eats and drinks judgment* to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly” (1 Cor. 11:29). “How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified . . . The Lord will judge His people” (Heb. 10:29-30).

¹⁵ *All Things New: The Significance of Newness for Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 93.

¹⁶ A.R. Pete Diamond, Jeremiah, ed. James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 590.

¹⁷ Keown, et al, 130.

enablement to keep covenant, changes in administration (removal of the temple), spirituality vs physicality? The discussion of the new covenant's discontinuity has too often lacked specificity. I will summarize my answers to this query after more exegetical observations.

Not all commentators conclude that this passage requires radical discontinuity. McConville terms it "renewal" - "The renewal goes right back to Abraham and Moses, not just to the fall of Judah, and re-creates the covenant; 'new' can mean 'renewed'."¹⁸ Certainly there were previous examples of "covenant renewal" (e.g., Gen. 17; Ex. 34; Josh. 24; 2Kgs. 23:24). The new covenant (31:31-34) reasserts the themes of the eschatological renewal promised in the Abrahamic covenant, just as with other prophets.¹⁹ This is the only use of "new covenant" in the OT; but, "the language and images of such newness are important in the restoration promises of other prophets, including a new heart and a new spirit (Ez. 11:19-20; 18:31; 36:26) and new things (Is. 42:9; 43:19; 48:6)."²⁰ Indeed, chs. 30-33 address the same renewal in the context of return and rebuilding. These chapters are emphasized in the outline of the book.

The text refers to "My covenant which they broke" (31:31). In what sense did the wilderness generation "break" the covenant? Israel's marvelous deliverance through the Red Sea culminated in the idolatry of the golden calf at the receiving of Torah (in which the tablets were actually broken). Covenant breaking had the consequence of not entering the Land (Ps. 95; Heb. 4). Constant unbelief, expressed in grumbling characterized that generation, e.g., "Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" (Ex. 14:11). God revealed His leadership of Israel to Moses; the people were to follow Moses. But they failed (Num. 11, 12, 14). Their covenant breaking was a mixture of testing Yahweh through a lack of faith, idolatry, and rejecting Moses' leadership.²¹ In the same way, the people refused to hear the word of Yahweh from Jeremiah. This is certainly part of the parallel of the wilderness generation and the days of vengeance, circa 586 B.C.

Another aspect of the infidelity of the wilderness generation comes through the allusion, "although I was a husband to them" (31:32). Jeremiah 3:1 provides another

¹⁸ McConville, 695.

¹⁹ The Abrahamic covenant was a renewal covenant of Adamic covenant, after the fall. This is in accord with Rom. 4:13, Abraham as "heir of the world," a view supported by Cranfield, Dunn, Wright, et al. See my, "The Land Promise: Exegetical Evidence for a Postmillennial Reading," available at <http://www.wordmp3.com/details.aspx?id=3377>.

²⁰ Patrick D. Miller, "The Book of Jeremiah," in *Introduction to Prophetic Literature; Lamentations-Ezekiel*, vol. 6 of *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Accordance electronic ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 812.

²¹ "And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?" (Num. 14:11).

explicit reference to Yahweh as husband.²² This theme hung in the air of all the prophets, as in the sexually explicit Ezekiel 16 and the entire book of Hosea (Is. 54). The theme is indirectly stated early in Israel's history by calling idolatry *harlotry* (Ex. 34:15-16; Lev. 17:7).

Part of the "newness" of the new covenant involves marital imagery. Since "covenant breaking in the form of apostasy is likened to adultery Only a powerful act of divine mercy could make them God and people for each other again."²³ Such idolatry was the stated reason for Israel going into the death of exile.²⁴ Thus, "God is portrayed as the long-suffering and faithful husband who restores a faithless wife."²⁵

Jeremiah is echoing (Mosaic) Deuteronomy in emphasizing heart renewal. For example, the "likeness to Deuteronomic diction, notably in the first half, is deliberate . . ." ²⁶ Moses said the law is "in your mouth and in your heart" (Dt. 30:14; e.g., 30:1, 2, 6, 10, 14, 17, 32:46). Jeremiah previously used the metaphor of "hardness of heart" (17:1), as well as a "deceitful heart" (17:9). The discontinuity of the new covenant and previous covenants is not the mere placement of the law in the heart rather than on stone.²⁷ The emphasis here is consonant in both the OT and the NT: the "heart" is the operative organ of obedience or disobedience (Ex. 8:15; Dt. 6:5; Mt. 6:21, 12:30).²⁸ "The conviction that having the LORD's word in or on one's heart prevents sin and fosters obedience is found in various places in the OT (e.g., Ps. 40:8, 119:11; Dt. 11:18)."²⁹

Torah was never meant to be on mere stones. Parallel to this, Jeremiah calls Israel to, "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD and remove the foreskins of your heart" (4:4). Jeremiah warns of judgment to those "who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised" (9:25). In fact, judgment is imminent because, "all the house of Israel are

²² "God says, 'If a husband divorces his wife and she goes from him and belongs to another man, will he still return to her? Will not that land be completely polluted? But you are a harlot with many lovers; Yet you turn to Me,' declares the LORD."

²³ Keown, et al, 132.

²⁴ Note the "death and resurrection" used of exile in Jonah (Mt. 12:39-40) and 1Kgs. 12:3, 13:26-32.

²⁵ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s.v. "God as Husband," (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1986), 414.

²⁶ Holladay, 197.

²⁷ E.g., "He will put His Law in their minds and on their hearts, not just on stones (Ex. 34:1)." Charles H. Dyer, *Jeremiah* (The Bible Knowledge Commentary; ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck; Accordance electronic ed. 2 vols.; Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 1:1171.

²⁸ "Akkadian also uses the nouns (heart and mind) parallel to one another in reference to the center of reason and emotion." John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 664.

²⁹ Keown, et al, 134.

uncircumcised of heart" (9:26). This is a communal description which has individual application. "For the stipulations formerly written on stone will now be internalized within communal hearts effective finally in producing the fidelity so often yearned for in Jeremiah's oracles of doom (e.g., 4:4, 'circumcise the foreskin of your hearts')." ³⁰

Some of these terms may reflect temple imagery; remember Jeremiah's context: "Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD'" (7:4). There may be a temple allusion here (cf. 6:1, 6:6; "heart" is paralleled with altar in 17:1). ³¹ "One may conclude that 'within them' and 'on their heart' suggest a renewal of worship in the temple." ³²

Jeremiah's *content of the promise* is the same. God condescends to be a God to His people. "The goal in both covenants is the same (so Peake): 'I will be their God, and they will be my people' (cf. v.33 with Exod 29:45; Lev 26:12)." ³³ This formula appears in the previous chapter (30:22), as well as here, "I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (31:33). "According to this passage, it is not the content of the new covenant which will be different, but how it is learned." ³⁴

My People

"My people" is defined as all "the families of Israel"—"they shall be My people" (31:1); "Thy people, the remnant of Israel . . . the woman with child and she who is in labor with child, together; a great company, they shall return here (31:7-8); "My people shall be satisfied with My goodness" . . . "Rachel" is comforted because "your children shall return to their own territory" (31:14-17). "My people" (*la am*) explicitly and repeatedly is inclusive of children in context (31:1, 7-8, 14-17) and the "offspring of Israel" (31:36-37).

There is no reason within the argument and context of Jeremiah to believe the central covenant promise has been altered to exclude children. Yahweh will be "God to you and your descendants" (Gen. 17:7, Ex. 29:45, Dt. 7:9, Dt. 29:13, 30:6, 1Ch. 16:15, Ps. 103:17, 105:8). Hence, the central covenant promise ("I will be their God, and they shall be My people," 31:33) is the very same as was given to Abraham and Moses, and throughout

³⁰Diamond, 590-591.

³¹ James B. Jordan observes, "Any ancient person knew that Temples were simultaneously microcosmic models of the universe, of human society, and of the human person. . . . Ezekiel was a priest, and the book of Ezekiel is written throughout in terms of Temple and sacrificial imagery" ("Thoughts on Sovereign Grace and Regeneration," from the Theopolis Papers, available <http://www.wordmp3.com/details.aspx?id=27874>).

³² Holladay, 198.

³³ Charles L. Feinberg, Jeremiah, ed. Frank E. Gaebelien and J. D. Douglas, vol. 6 of *Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), paragraph 37329.

³⁴ Berwin, et al, paragraph 6367.

the Old Testament literature. As Calvin says, “God has never made any other covenant than that which he made formerly with Abraham, and at length confirmed by the hand of Moses.”³⁵ Whether this is so or not, it is difficult to remove children from the new covenant in context; or at least it will require an elaborate hermeneutical procedure.

Know Yahweh

In the context of Jeremiah, those who handled Torah “did not know Me” (2:7-8). The phrase “from the least to the greatest” (*miqqāṭṭōn w^e ‘ad-gāḏōl*) is interpreted in various ways. Feinberg says, “‘The least of them’ is very broad in meaning and includes ‘the least’ in intellectual ability, in influence or position, in moral capacity—all are included in the comprehensive scope of the phrase.”³⁶ However, this phrase is used two other times in Jeremiah: 6:13 and 8:8-10.

In these two cases we find congruity. In 6:13, “For from the least of them even to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for gain, and from the prophet even to the priest everyone deals falsely.”³⁷ This is the explanation of the judgments cited in 6:11-12.³⁸ The parallel of “least to the greatest” is “prophet even to priest.” In a precise parallel in 8:8-10, Jeremiah accuses “the lying pen of the scribes” and “wise men” who “have rejected the word of the LORD” “because from the least even to the greatest everyone is greedy for gain; from the prophet even to the priest everyone practices deceit.” Both 6:13 and 8:8-10 refer to “prophet even to priest” in parallel with “least to greatest.”

There is a special reference to those who “teach” in this phrase, identifying OT religious leadership. Likewise in other prophets: “Hosea 4:4–6 blames the priests and prophets for the loss of the knowledge of God in the land.”³⁹ This word reflects the earlier promise, that after returning to the land and to the Lord, “Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding” (3:15).

³⁵ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries* (Complete), trans. John King, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847), paragraph 39282.

³⁶ Feinberg, paragraph 37328.

³⁷ The previous context refers to children, young men, husbands, wives (6:11-12). They will be judged in exile, “Their houses shall be turned over to others” (6:12).

³⁸ Holladay is mistaken in stating that the phrase occurs only 6:13 and 5:4-5; it does not occur in 5:4-5 at all, only the term “great” (*gadol*) occurs, but in 8:8 it is “least” (*qaton*) and “great” (*gadol*). He states, “The phrase appears in 6:13 in the context of a listing of the population from children to aged (6:11), and the implication of ‘teaching’ in Deuteronomy is that of teaching one’s children (see above). On the other hand, the context of a similar contrast in 5:4–5 (where the word ‘great’ is identical, but ‘poor’ appears instead of ‘least’) is that of social class (one notes that that passage deals with “knowing the way of Yahweh”). Doubtless both nuances are intended...” Holladay, 198-199.

³⁹ Keown, et al, 135.

Certainly the new covenant (according to the NT) means that the knowledge of the Lord will be present in all classes of people, not merely prophets and priests. But Jeremiah draws a strong relationship between “least to the greatest” and “prophets and priests.” This reinforces the view that the new covenant promise has special reference to the removal of forms of mediation of the knowledge of God (e.g., through prophets, priests, temple, etc.). “One of the grand features of the new covenant is that it affords a clear apprehension of God and his will by believers without human mediation.”⁴⁰

This prophetic image is correlated with the removal of Mosaic forms of mediation (the ark in the holy of holies). “Notice that the covenant shows no dependence on law, temple, sacrifices, ark, human priesthood, nation, or country”⁴¹ Of the most important symbol of the Mosaic forms, the ark of the covenant, it is said “nor shall they remember it, nor shall they miss it, nor shall it be made again” (3:16). Calvin observes the “newness” relates to the “form” and “manner” which is “external.” “It being new, no doubt refers to what they call the form; and the form, or manner, regards not words only, but first Christ, then the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the whole external way of teaching. But the substance remains the same.”⁴²

Connected to this supersession of the old forms, there is a concept of the universal knowledge of God. Jeremiah alludes to the blessings of the universal knowledge of God, “they shall all know Me” (31:34). “Knowledge of God will extend to all ages and classes”⁴³ Jeremiah’s words remind one of the familiar prophetic refrain, “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD” (Is. 11:9, Hab. 2:14).

An interpretation focused on the superseding of OT forms of mediation seems to be confirmed by what follows, “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (31:34). This language should be read (firstly) in relation to OT Israel. “The final promise in this verse will put an end to the threat in Jer .14:10: when the LORD remembers sin, punishment follows (cf 44:21). But the LORD’s promise not to remember their sins anymore means an end to divine wrath (31:23, 28).”⁴⁴

From the Old Testament (and Gospels) perspective, this statement must have been striking (Mk. 2:5; Mt. 9:2). Every sacrificial spilling of blood was an occasion to

⁴⁰ Feinberg, paragraph 37328.

⁴¹ Feinberg, paragraph 37329.

⁴² Calvin, paragraph 39283.

⁴³ Holladay, 2:198–99, cited in Keown, et al, 135.

⁴⁴ Keown, et al, 135.

remember sin. Now, sin will not even be remembered. There will be no need for a Day of Atonement and spilling blood on the Ark of the Covenant or “mercy seat.” Contextually, the emphasis is on the change in God: “All of this happens by a divine reversal, a change in the heart of God toward the people (v. 34*b*). This change is not all that surprising because it has happened again and again.”⁴⁵ Repetitious, symbolic animal sacrifices were a regular reminder of sin and the need for forgiveness. Somehow this will be superseded. Certainly, it is much easier to see this after it has been shown to us through the lens of New Testament revelation, and particularly the epistle to the Hebrews (esp., Heb. 8-10).

The new covenant promises the people in exile will return, rebuild and that Yahweh will be their God, despite all the previous breaches of covenant. The eschatological future of Jerusalem, Israel and Judah are bright. Jerusalem will be called “throne of the LORD” and “all the nations will be gathered to it” (3:17). This is quite thematic to 31:34, since all will be gathered to the place of knowing the God of Israel (Jerusalem). The exilic and post-exilic prophets envision Jerusalem as “without walls,” with “latter glory,” without the ark, or ignorant priests, and with cleansing waters flowing out to cleanse the world (Zech. 2:4; Hag. 2:9; Jer. 3:15-16; Ez. 47:3).⁴⁶

New Covenant Newness in Context

To summarize, the new covenant (firstly) applied to the post-exilic Israelites, including their children, predicting their return to and rebuilding of Jerusalem (Jer. 31:1, 7-8, 36, 37). This is what happened, as we know. The eschatological implications of this extend beyond this study, though the above paragraph hints at a greater fulfillment.

Many Christian interpreters ask, how new is the new covenant? What has changed? What exactly is the discontinuity captured in terms of “new,” “not like,” etc? I will draw together some conclusions based the exegetical observations above.

Does the newness relate to the content of the promise (“I will be God to you”)? From the above study it is clear that there is continuity on the content of this promise. The new

⁴⁵ Miller, 812.

⁴⁶ The use of the Jer. 31:31-34 in Heb. 10:16-17, as well as the vision of a Mount Zion “above” (Heb. 12) validates the view that the new covenant’s emphasis removes OT forms of the mediation of the knowledge of God (Heb. 10:23). “The inefficiency of the old covenant sacrifices to take away sin is contrasted with the final once for all nature of the new covenant through the death of Christ on the cross.” David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, vol. 35 of *The New American Commentary*. Accordance electronic ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2010), 505. “A new covenant is in force which makes the Leviticus sacrifices obsolete.” Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 6 of *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. IVP/Acordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 211. “The phrase, in effect, reiterates the insight derived from the exegesis of Ps 40 in vss. 8–9, that the old cultic system has been abrogated. What that system aimed at has been replaced by the unique and ever-effective sacrifice of Christ.” Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Helmut Koester, vol. 79 of *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*. Accordance electronic ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 282.

covenant confirms the same promise as the Abrahamic covenant, "I will be their God, and they shall be My people. . . the offspring of Israel also shall [not] cease from being a nation before Me forever" (Jer. 31:33, 36-37; cf. 31:1, 7-8, 14-17; Gen. 17:7; Ex. 29:45, Dt. 7:9).

Is it a suzerainty-vassal covenant with stipulations for blessing and judgment? It may be argued that the form of covenant may be different; but it appears that given the long history of Israel with multiple covenant renewals that not every passage expressing a covenant includes all of the aspects of a formal covenant treaty. If the new covenant is specifically limited to the post-exilic era, then it would have similar stipulations which build upon the Mosaic administration with the expectation of judgments for covenant breaking, which of course happened by the time of Jesus.⁴⁷ But at the very least, when one connects Jer. 31:31-34 to the NT about the "new covenant," language of stipulations for judgment are explicit.⁴⁸

Are the recipients different? Is God making a covenant with his people or only the "elect" of Israel, "true Israel," a regenerate people, or an "invisible Church," etc.? It is certainly true that the language of "remnant" is used. But this has several senses in Scripture. Since the original remnants include those in exile who are to return to rebuild Jerusalem, it is untenable to conclude the covenant recipients are an invisible, elect, or specially selected group. On the other hand, the astounding promises in the new covenant can only fully be true of those that are finally delivered into the kingdom of God. There is an eschatological dimension to this prophecy, as in other OT prophetic passages which await some kind of fulfillment (Zech. 2:4; Hag. 2:9).⁴⁹

Does the covenant provide for the enablement to keep covenant in a different form than before? It certainly seems that God promises a greater enablement. It is couched in prophetic hyperbole. "All will know me" and "remember their sin no more" (31:34). The new covenant promises the heart renewal of God's people and promises the work of the Spirit to bring it about (Dt. 30:6, Jer. 4:4, 31:33).

⁴⁷ I am thinking here of John the Baptist's pungent reproof of the religious leadership of Israel: "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Mt. 3:7).

⁴⁸ When Paul speaks of the new covenant meal, he says, "For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly" (1Cor. 11:29). "How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? 30 For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE" (Heb. 10:29-30).

⁴⁹ The Christian interpreter's eschatology comes to play here. A premillennial, amillennial, or postmillennial interpreter will finally disagree about the fullest meaning of this prophecy since the program of each interpreter's eschatology will affect the view of fulfillment. However, the conclusions and exegetical observations above address the original context of the new covenant prophecy. I think it is an unreasonable hermeneutic to wrench Jer. 31:31-34 out of this context. Whatever the fulfillment may entail needs to be *fulfillment*, not a diminution of the original promise in context.

Is there a change in administration (removal of the temple), spirituality vs physicality? The new covenant addresses the knowledge of God to His shepherds and the removal of at least some Mosaic forms of mediation (e.g., the ark of the covenant, Jer. 3:15, 31:34). The new covenant looks forward to a time when there will not be repeated sacrifices to remind of sin, since there will be a final sacrifice (Jer. 31:34, 3:15-16, Heb. 10:3, 14-15).

Finally, Jer. 31:31-34 is a summation of many of the consolation themes of Jeremiah. The new covenant in context is a promise to a *people* (Israel). Yahweh will give His people heart renewal to follow Torah, deeper and expanded knowledge of Himself, and forgiveness from previous covenant apostasy. As a Christian reader, all of these conclusions point to knowing the crucified Messiah — Jesus, whose blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:24).