

“Those who handle the law have not known me.” This text from Jeremiah 2:8 should cause anyone who interacts with the Scripture to take pause and seek introspection. The ultimate responsibility and honor of everyone is to know the Lord (Jer 9:24). Yet there is no guarantee that those who “handle” the word of God actually have a relationship with Him. The goal of all preaching, when connected with exegesis, should be to bring forth the Word of God accurately, so that the hearer can know the Lord in a more intimate way. It is through this Word that we gain eternal life (2 Timothy 3:15; 1 Peter 1:23), are sanctified (John 17:17), and ultimately grow in the grace and knowledge of Him (2 Peter 3:18; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). The goal of this paper is to elucidate the exegetical understanding and application of the Old Testament passage of Jeremiah 31:31-34. Even though other sources have been consulted, the pattern of this essay will follow that as suggested by John Bright in his article on preaching from the Old Testament. He lists three methodological approaches: 1) Grammatico-historical exegesis; 2) “Theological Exegesis”; 3) New Testament Correlation.¹

Grammatico-Historical Exegesis

The setting and historical background to the book of Jeremiah is important in order to understand some of the details of the textual exegesis which will be presented subsequently. Historically, the oracles of Jeremiah are set in a time that extends many decades and also in the environment of geo-political instability. It is recorded that Jeremiah was called from the womb (1:1-5) and began his ministry in the 13th year of Josiah’s reign (his reign began in 640 B.C.). There is debate as to whether this refers to

¹ John Bright, 189-191.

his birth/call in 627 B.C.² or the actual beginning of his ministry as a young man.³ Needless to say, the ministry begins at a time when the history of God's people stands at a major crossroads. The geographical proximity of Israel to other world powers allowed for constant interaction and threats (ie. Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Philistines). The 8th century brought the power of Assyria and its king Tiglath Pileser III down to bear and ultimately the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel due to their sin (Jeremiah 7:12). The deportation of Israel and their sin was often used as an object lesson and warning to Jeremiah's audience of Judah (3:8-11). Babylon conquered Assyria in 612 B.C. and Egypt in 605 B.C. and was God's instrument and threat towards apostate Judah.⁴ After warnings of impending judgment by the hand of Babylon (Jer 20-21), it becomes a reality with the news that they will be exiled for 70 years (25:12). It is reasonable to believe that this message of 31:31-34 was preached before the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. as well as for encouragement to a Judahite remnant afterwards.⁵

The structure of the Book of Jeremiah warrants brief mention. The fact that Jeremiah contains prose and poetry has challenged some in ascertaining an undisputable structuring of the book. The basic outline has chapters 1-25 as a 1st "book" containing the theme of judgment on Judah and Jerusalem. Chapters 26-29 and 34-35 contain biographical information and are wrapped around what is known as the Book of Consolation (Hope) of 30-33. The final chapters of 46-51 contain oracles against other

² Holladay, 1.

³ Thompson, 11.

⁴ Provan, 276-277.

⁵ Lundbom, 411.

nations with a closing chapter (52) that appears to be an historical appendix almost identical to 2 Kings 24:18-25:30.⁶

The structure of our passage is noted as having two separate chiastic patterns within the four verses. The first two verses are bracketed chiastically with reference to day(s), followed by references to the New Covenant being established with Israel/Judah, distinctions and contrasts with the Old Sinaitic Covenant, and climaxed with the greatest event in Old Testament salvation history, the Exodus.⁷ The second pair of verses “offers a chiasmus with respect to verbs and prepositional complements.”⁸ Others try to structure the oracle around the four references to Gods’ יְהוָה even though this doesn’t seem to provide a clear and cohesive outline.⁹ There are certain points that Jeremiah highlights in this passage. We can list them as: 1) A future new covenant is coming; 2) It is in contrast to the broken Sinai covenant; 3) obedience will be rooted internally; 4) all will have knowledge or a relationship with God; 5) there will be forgiveness of sins.

A more dynamic translation of the Hebrew of 31:31-34 which I am providing is as follows: 31) Behold, the days are coming says Yahweh when I will establish a new covenant with the family of Israel and Judah, 32) This covenant will be very different than the one I established with their fathers when I led them by the hand out of the land of Egypt, because of the fact that¹⁰ they broke my previous covenant, even though I

⁶ Thompson, 30-32.

⁷ Holladay (1989), 165.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Gehman, 285.

¹⁰ Robinson notes that after the word *Mitzraim*, there is a disjunctive *athnach* accent giving greater force to *asher* which follows, 192.

myself was married to them says Yahweh. 33) In contrast¹¹, this is the covenant which I establish with the family of Israel after those days says Yahweh. I will put¹² my instruction in their innermost beings and upon their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. 34) No longer will it be necessary for a man to teach his neighbor or brother about knowing Yahweh, for all of them will know me. From the youngest to the oldest says Yahweh. For I will forgive their sins and will never again remember their iniquities.

There are not many exegetical anomalies in this passage, but there are theological connections that will be brought out in the next section. Some exegetical notes worth mentioning include the meaning of הַיְיָ הַשֵּׁנִי and its elucidation in the LXX. Does it mean new or can it mean in renewed? The LXX has the word *kainos* which generally denotes that which is “new in nature, different from the usual, better than the old, and superior in value or attraction.”¹³ As was mentioned in footnote 11, the presence of an *athnach* in verse 32 brings greater force to the אֲשֶׁר which highlights the breaking of the Mosaic Covenant. The presence of four declarations נִאֲמַרְיָהוּהוּא helps us to realize that Yahweh’s authority stands behind this new thing that He is going to do in the future. One additional exegetical note warrants mentioning. In verse 32 instead of “I was married to them”, the LXX reads, “I disregarded them.”

Theological Exegesis

It is safe to say that this passage of Scripture has caused the consternation and damaging of relationships for almost two millennia. Primarily between a Christian

¹¹ This is an adversative *ki* followed by two climatic uses of *ki* in verse 34, see note 41 in Kaiser, p. 19.

¹² This is a standard perfect, but it is sandwiched between two imperfects, which seems to demand that it be rendered future. Other MSS have *waw* consecutive with the perfect as noted by Holladay (1989), 154.

¹³ Johannes Behm, 447.

interpretation and that of Jewish exegetes. What exactly is meant by a new covenant? Does it inevitably lead to supersessionism or replacement theology? Based on New Testament references, what relationship does the predominantly Gentile church have with a Jewish covenant promised to be made specifically with Israel? The scope of this paper does not allow delving too deeply into these theological viewpoints, but some will be covered in this section and the next.

Theological context is key when entering into a discussion of the New Covenant. We must acknowledge that, for the most part, Jeremiah has had a failing ministry. This is in the sense that for all his warnings and judgments, there was no collective repentance on the part of Judah and the result was exile. He has challenged them to repent and return to being faithful in reference to the covenant of God (11:2, 3, 6, 8, 10; 14:21; 22:9, 31:32; 34:13, 15, 18). He has further challenged the leadership in their disobedient failing of this exact responsibility (2:8; 5:31; 6:13, 17; 10:21; 14:18; 23:13; 27:16; 28:2). Additionally, he made reference to the stubbornness and wickedness that resides in the stubbornness of the heart (3:10, 17, 4:4, 14, 18; 5:23; 7:24; 9:14; 9:25-26; 11:8; 13:10; 16:12; 17:1, 9; 18:12; 22:17; 23:17).

The context immediately preceding our passage makes reference to a proverb that challenges the justice of corporate punishment. It is a proverb that is also mentioned in Ezekiel 18:2. The point of this reference seems to be that the exilic generation is complaining that they are the recipients of judgment that their ancestors have brought upon them. This is consistent with the collective punishment that God promised would be a part of the Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 20:5). The key focus in this dilemma is one of collective punishment and not being punished for another individual.

God spoke clearly in Deuteronomy 24:16 that individuals were not to be put to death or punished in the place of others. Yet here, there still remains the collective inheritance of judgment that was brought upon their ancestors.

These are all theological themes presented in Jeremiah that have an answer in the New Covenant passage. Again, if we look at the weaknesses and challenges that Jeremiah faced in his preaching, we can see that the people failed in their response to fulfilling God's demands on them in obeying His covenant. When sinful humanity fails to respond in obedience to God's Law there is nothing but judgment and cursings (Deut 28). Their disobedience and exile was not something unexpected (Deut 30:1-6). What Jeremiah and almost all of the Old Testament prophets longed for was hope. This was a hope not just for restoration, but also for a new heart and ability that would be able to fulfill the demands of the law of God (Ezekiel 18:31; 11:19; 36:26; Deut 30:6, 14; 10:12). Thus bringing about a right relationship with a holy God.

The New Covenant brings out a variety of stipulations that answers the challenges preached by Jeremiah. An examination of this new covenant will show various levels of continuity and discontinuity between them. Some of the similarities are that this is a covenant that God initiates and which is made with the people of Israel (Jer 31:31). There has been major disagreement over whether this is a "renewed" covenant or whether it is completely different from the Mosaic covenant as stated explicitly in the text. However, for it to be "not like" the covenant of Moses doesn't demand that there aren't similarities. As noted, the issues of the heart, fulfilling their role and keeping their relationship as God's people, forgiveness of sin are themes that

have originated in the Mosaic covenant.¹⁴ Yet some want to avoid the clear teaching of the text and focus on how this new covenant is “like” Mosaic Covenant, instead focusing on the similarities. They will seek to justify “new” as referring to renewed such as Hebrew root connection to the new moon, while at the same time focusing on other names for this covenant (everlasting- Isaiah 55:3).¹⁵

Staying with the distinctive nature of the text, others see הַשְׁכֵּן as being clearly new and distinct even though there are similarities. Gerhard Von Rad states emphatically that the old covenant is broken and that Jeremiah’s view is that Israel is currently without a covenant.¹⁶ To go that far is not as persuasive as simply acknowledging that there is no explicit continuity between the two covenants. The new covenant is not a reformed or renewed Mosaic covenant, but instead is one that is new, albeit with similar expectations as the old. Harry Potter states, “The whole point of these verses is that they are a deliberate contrast to Deuteronomy, not a complement to it, or a restatement of it.”¹⁷ Additionally, Brevard Childs comments in a study that he did of Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Hebrew meanings and concluded that newness in the OT is expresses both new in time and new in quality. Thus, “the new covenant... is not simply a renewal of the Sinai covenant as occurred in the yearly festivals.”¹⁸

Needing to press forward we can see that the New Covenant does have its own distinctions, as almost all would agree. It is at this point that we can share some of the theological newness that Jeremiah addresses. We are told again that this covenant is

¹⁴ Wallis, 107-108.

¹⁵ Kaiser, 16-17.

¹⁶ Von Rad, 212.

¹⁷ Potter, 350.

¹⁸ Childs, 79-80.

לֹא כְבֻרִית. This brings us to the task of unwrapping exegetically and theologically those things that are mentioned as distinct. As we do this its important to note the themes of failure mentioned prior as it relates to the people and the Mosaic Covenant. Verse 32 clearly tells us that this is the covenant of Moses or that related to the Exodus. We are also told that this is a covenant that was broken (hiphil). Whether we take the MT and God being a husband (or ruler) to them or the LXX, “I disregarded them” might flavor our interpretation. The LXX might fit well with the brokenness of the covenant and the fact that it has become useless. The MT might force us to see still hints of compassion in God’s eyes as He laments the brokenness of the covenant even though he was a faithful husband to them.

The adversative וְ that begins verse 33 again highlights the contrast in which God will make this new covenant with Israel¹⁹ after those days. The result of this New Covenant is that God will put his Torah within the individual and also write it on upon the hearts of the individual. We have already seen the failure and negative messages against the failure of the hearts of the people. Something drastic needs to take place. The writing of God’s law on the stone tablets (Exodus 24:12) was right, but it didn’t produce the results that were expected. Again, we see powerlessness on the part of the people in their connection to God’s law in fulfilling it. God predicts that in the future, He is going to do something drastic to fulfill His purposes. The Law will no longer be on stones, but will be put directly on the heart and within them. Jeremiah realizes the weakness of mankind in changing their ways in his comments about the Ethiopian

¹⁹ There is no mention of Judah in this passage. Scholars will debate as to whether this implies a reunification of the two in the eschaton and thus no need to mention Judah. We might even see this in the New Testament where Israel is the preferred term.

changing His skin or a leopard his spots (13:23). Jeremiah seems to make a comparison to the law that was written on tablet to the sin that is so embedded in the heart of man that it also is likened to unbreakable tablets (17:1-2).

God has sought from the beginning to bring a people for Himself (Exodus 6:7) and continued this theme in Jeremiah (7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 32:38). This New Covenant will finally and fully bring this to a completed fact (31:33).

Another weakness that resulted from the law being written externally on tablets was the need for teachers. God had commanded them to teach His torah diligently to the children of Israel so that they might have life (Deut 4:9-10; 5:31; 6:4-6; 11:19). Yet in Jeremiah we see that this teaching is only one of evil (2:33; 9:4, 13). To solve this weakness, the New Covenant promises that teaching will be unnecessary for God the Law will be put on their hearts and inward beings. There will be no limit for the smallest to the greatest, or youngest to the oldest will have knowledge of God. The New Covenant promises that **כִּי־לֵב** will have this knowledge and relationship. It is this knowledge of God that Jeremiah has sought to accomplish. Not a superficial knowledge (2:8), but a genuine knowledge of Him in relationship (4:22; 9:2-5; 22:16; 24:7). The New Covenant successfully accomplishes this.

Finally, there is the promise of the forgiveness of sin (31:34). The issue of sin and the separation that it brings (Isaiah 59:2) is obvious beginning in Genesis 3, through the Torah, and into the preaching of Jeremiah. It is here that the finality of offense is taken away and opens up the path for the relationship to be restored permanently.

New Testament Correlation

This paper is an Old Testament exegetical paper, so not much time will be spent here. Yet we realize that the longest quote from the OT in the NT is our passage. It is quoted in its entirety in Hebrews 8 and is highlighting the superiority of the New Covenant in its effectiveness in removing sin as against the Mosaic Covenant. This has led some to attribute fault to the Law of God which is contrary to Paul's perspective in Romans 7:7 where he calls the law holy, righteous, and good. A careful analysis underscores that the writer to the Hebrews doesn't find fault with the Mosaic Covenant per se, but instead with "them" (8:8). The NT bears its full weight that old system didn't wash away sins (10:4), but the sacrifice of Jesus was necessary to bring perfection (10:14). Therefore, it is a better covenant (7:22) and logically renders the old ineffective covenant as obsolete and ready to vanish away (8:13; 2 Cor 3:11).

We are told that clearly that Jesus' death is done in fulfillment and as the basis of the New Covenant (1 Cor 11:25; Luke 22:20). It is our connection to Jesus and through Israel that we who were far off (Eph 2:11-18) have been brought near and grafted into the covenants of promise (Romans 11:11-24).

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