

THE "NEW COVENANT" IN THE BOOK OF CONSOLATION (JER. 30-31)

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INTRODUCTION

Jer. 31, 31-34 is titled the new covenant. This pericope recounts the proposal of a new covenant between God and the people of Israel. It is the climax of the book of consolation. All the good innovations promised by God will become irrevocable and permanent within the context of the covenant. The singular goal of Israel would be to return to the covenant relationship, which they earlier had with God.

DELIMITATION OF TEXT

This pericope begins with the word "hineh" - behold, which generally marks the beginning of a new discussion in Hebrew. It shows that the topic of discussion has changed from what it earlier was. The text is further demarcated from that which precedes it by the phrase, 'days are coming', which limits the message that will follow to the context of the future and not the past as in the preceding pericope. The phrase 'says the Lord' of v.31 shows God as speaking anew, different from what he had earlier said in v.29 or what with be introduced by a similar expression in v.35.

The personages are the same as in the preceding pericope but the subject has changed. Here, God is no longer talking about individual responsibility for sin as in the preceding pericope but has introduced the covenant as a subject. Finally, the pericope is distinct from that which follows in terms of style; this is in prose while the next is in poetry.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

There are some textual variations in the manuscripts:

- v.31 Some scholars think that 'and the house of Judah' should be a later addition to the text because the phrase is not repeated in v.33 which repeats a similar formula.
- v.32 The word "ba'al", can be translated as husband, master or lord. Whichever translation is chosen does not change the meaning of the passage. There are cultures even today where the husband is called lord or master by the woman.
- v.33a Some manuscripts have 'sons of' in place of 'house of'
- v.33b Many manuscripts have 'I will give' in place of 'I gave'

TRANSLATION

The New Revised Standard translation is adequate except that some words "karat" - make a covenant, which is translated here as 'leading by the hand', also means bringing out with firm hand, that connotes bringing out with force, which is lost in the translation 'when I led them by the hand.'

LITERARY CRITICISM

This pericope faces the same problem as the rest of the book of Consolation. It is a widely held view among scholars that the idea in the pericope goes back to Jeremiah himself though a Deuteronomistic redactor might have reworked the text. One may conclude with the words of Thompson that it "may not preserve his *ipsissima verba*, but it would be strange indeed if Jeremiah's remarkable theological insights did not lead him through to this point, especially in view of the fact that he

LITERARY GENRE

The literary style used here is principally covenantal but situated in the context of an oracle delivered by a prophet. The oracle itself speaks about salvation, a salvation which has the climax of its beginning in the making of the covenant with the people. Though the oracular and the salvific style are present in the pericope, one can still see that the contract or covenantal style dominates. All the principal stages of a covenantal style are present:

- a) God introduces himself as the person who makes the covenant and the house of Israel as the party with whom he makes the covenant.
- b) God made reference to his past deeds for this people. Here reference is made
- c) God will offer the people his protection. He will be their God, they will be his people and he will also forgive their sins.
- (d) The people's contribution, which will be the sign of their acceptance, is that they will carry the law in their hearts.

STRUCTURE

The pericope could be divided into two parts: (i) vv. 31-32, (ii) vv.33-34 with one part running parallel to the other. Each part contains the phrase "says the Lord" at the beginning and the end and these mark their division. Apart from

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE KEY IDEAS

A progressive development of the message of the pericope could be traced through the principal ideas that occur in it. We have individualised five of these: the name of God, the verbs describing his action, the covenant he wants to institute and the people with whom he was going to institute it and their actions past and future.

Jeremiah 31,31-34

31	y hwah	w karati	b rit	bet yisra'el bet y hudaah
32	ba alti y hwah heperu	karati	kabb rit b riti	abotam
33	y hwah	ekrot natati ektabenah w hayiti	habb rit torati	bet yisra'el l am
34	y hwah du			lo' y lamm d'u yed
	'u			kalam l miqtanam g dolam 'eslah lo' 'ezkar ul hatta lam

God. The name of God has three variations in this pericope, though there are lots of personal pronouns because God was speaking in the first person. In v.31 God was introduced as Yahweh-Lord, which is more of a personal name than functional. In v.32 he called himself Ba'al of Israel. Ironically, Israel's sin was that she was looking for a ba'al elsewhere outside God but God defined his relationship with them by applying the name to himself. In v.33 God is called *Elohim*, a name that

these, reference to the days that were to come in v.31 and the days gone by in v.33 also mark out each part. Each part can further be divided into two segments

A	A1
v.31 The days are surely coming says the Lord I will make a new covenant with - the house of Israel - and the house of Judah	v.33 after those days says the Lord this is the covenant that I will make with - the house of Israel: I will put my law within them I will write it on their hearts; I will be their God and they shall be my people
B	B1
v.32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors a covenant that they broke though I was their husband	v.34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other "Know the Lord" for they shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest says the Lord for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more

The first segment of each part, i.e. vv 31 and 33 speak about the new covenant. In v.31 God simply says that there will be a new covenant, but in v.33 he speaks about the nature of the new covenant. The second segment of each part deal with the old covenant and how it was operated. In the first part, God spoke of the covenant he made that was broken. He also pointed to the fact they did this though he was still their husband/master. In the second part, he outlined the efforts made by man to keep the covenant in view and mind, namely teaching

At the end of the second part, God gave the meaning and the function of the title husband/master, which he gave in the first part, instead of the punishment that was expected as a result of their sins, there will be forgiveness.

spells out the aim of the covenant; that he Yahweh should be their God and they should be his people. We may conclude that the new covenant will bring about the relationship between God and Israel as spelt out in this pericope. God will no longer be a name, but the person who had been active in Israel's history and is still active, but above all he is the God of Israel and they are his people.

v.31	Lord	make	covenant	house of Israel
v.32	husband/master	make	covenant	house of Judah
	Lord		covenant	their ancestors
v.33	Lord	make	covenant	they broke
		give	law	house of Israel
		write		
	God	be		
				people
v.34	Lord			be
or	Lord			not teach
				say know
				know
				all
				small
				great
		forgive	iniquity	
		not remember	sin	

The Action of God: There are several verbs describing the actions of God in this pericope. His action begins with the verb "karat" - to cut, the classical verb for establishing a covenant. In v.33b the verb becomes "natat" - to give, then it changes to "katav" - to write. All these were used for the same object - 'covenant'. In v.34, the actions of God took new dimensions; he forgives and forgets the sins and iniquities of Israel. The first three verbs, 'make, give, and write', describe how God wanted to make the covenant real in the life of Israel, but the effect of the covenant, which is the sign of its presence is the forgiveness of sins. This has been the singular aim of all the covenants, to keep Israel pure and dedicated to and be in communion with God.

Actions of Israel: The verbs denoting the actions of Israel here are principally negative. They broke, they shall not teach; they shall not say 'know'. Only at the end of the pericope after the intervention of God will their action become positive, then they will know. This is what God wants of them - to know him.

Object of God's actions: The word "b'rit" - covenant, features three times in the first three verses as what God wanted to establish with Israel. In v.33, the object becomes the law, but after that the notion of the covenant or law disappeared. What comes under this column are guilt and sins. This may force one to conclude like St. Paul that the efforts of Israel to keep the covenant represented by the law only led to sins and guilt (Rm. 5,13). In this case it makes a new covenant very necessary, a covenant based on mercy not justice.

The people of God: The notion of Israel also undergoes a gradual development. In v.32 the house of Israel and house of Judah were presented separately, denoting the division within them. In v.32 they were linked together by their fathers, so that in v.33 there was only a house of Israel, a pointer to the fact that they were one and they will be one. This is confirmed in this same verse when God called them my people and not my 'peoples'. The content of the house of Israel is found in v.34, they are neighbours or friends, small and great, all of them. Thus the division brought into the house after the death of Solomon will be healed when the new covenant is established.

EXPLANATION OF THE VERSES

v.31 "hineh" - behold: This imperative calls the attention of the listener, in this case the prophet. He is to note whatever was to be said. It also indicates that the speaker, God, was about to give a new and important message.

Days are coming: The time of arrival is not indicated, also the duration is not specified either. The emphasis is not on the beginning or the duration of the covenant but on its coming in the future.

I will make a new covenant: Just as indicated by the future state of the coming of the days, the making of the covenant is in the future. The word *kadash* - new, places emphasis on the newness of the covenant not just a renewal. The narrator took care to mention the two houses in order to avoid a misinterpretation that the promise is limited to a particular house as in the case of the Davidic covenant.

v.32 **It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors:** The covenant is dissociated from an earlier covenant. This difference could be interpreted in two ways: It may refer to the mode of making or the content of the covenant. The mode of making the covenant could be different or what is required of the participants could be different. Both are different as we shall see below; the mode is spiritual instead of physical (circumcision) and the content is forgiveness instead

of the law. This does not affect the result of the covenant which is that they will be God's people and he will be their God.

The "ancestors" here is taken to be referring to the ancestors that took part in the Exodus. It is not likely to be referring to Abraham and the patriarchs. Calling them by the name "house of Israel" shows that he still recognised these ancestors. Also with the reference to slavery in Egypt, it is definitely referring to the Exodus fathers.

'Though I was their husband/master': This verb is formed out of the noun *"ba' al"*. Its presence here is shocking. The name *"ba' al"* is usually used for the fertility god of the Canaanites which the prophets always warned the Israelites against. To have turned round and use the same term for God seems strange. This could be a play on words. The people of Israel were going to *"ba' al"* as if God was not sufficient. They could not recognise that all the credits given to *"ba' al"* was actually due to God because he was the one who played the role attributed to *"ba' al"*. This was the sin of Israel, they refused to recognise God as being sufficient in their lives, so he decided to take the name that fits the function that they attribute to other gods. The name also signifies the love-relationship between God and Israel.

v.33 In this verse, God specifies the content of the covenant he will make with the house of Israel.

"After these days": The covenant will only come after these days. Within the context, these days will refer to the days between the time of the oracle and its fulfilment, that is, the days of the suffering to which the book of consolation was talking about. This will mean that the people would have gone into exile, endure the punishment until the anger of the Lord has subsided. Even then, the making of the covenant might not be immediate, since, "after these days" may also refer to any time after the return from exile.

I will put my law in their midst: The covenant still entails the giving of a law. At first glance, one would think that the law will be in their midst just as the tablet of the Ten Commandments in the Ark or as the Ark in the Holy of Holies in the Temple. This still makes the law something external, something physical, but the next phrase clarifies what "midst" here means. That the law will be in the centre of man himself. For the Jews, the heart is the centre of man. It will be in the most important part of him, the heart. The law will not be a physical matter but a spiritual entity. If we combine the two verbs used for the making of the covenant

'cut' and 'write', it will mean that the law will actually be engraved on the heart of man. Any one who breaks this covenant will break his heart along with it.

The aim of the covenant is still what it had ever been. That God will be their God and they his people.

v.34 **'No longer shall they teach one another...':** This is an abrogation of the injunction given to the sons of Israel in the book of Deuteronomy regarding the covenant. It was an obligation laid on them that they had to teach the law to their children (cf. Deut 6,4-9). The reason for the abrogation may not be unconnected with the hypocritical way they handled the law. They repeated the words but did different things. Even at the time of Josiah, the Law was made to be read in the Temple, yet the people were still far away from the Lord. One could conclude that their teachings were not only useless but misleading as well. The teaching of wrong doctrines may not be ruled out (cf. Is 29,13; Mt. 15,8). For this reason God himself has decided to be their teacher. He will put the law in their hearts so that human teachers will no longer be needed.

As it has earlier been said, the aim of every covenant between God and Israel is that Israel might know God. This aim will still be achieved despite the change in the mode of making the covenant. All of them will know God, no exception. What will bring about the knowledge of God is explained in the next phrase.

'for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sins no more': This is one of the new characters of the New Covenant. God will pardon their iniquity and will not remember their sins again. Unlike as contained in the Decalogue, the God who would visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation has become a God who will not remember faults and sins again. He is starting a relationship with Israel on a new note. This characterises the New Covenant as the covenant of Mercy not Justice.

MESSAGE OF THE PERICOPHE

At the beginning of the pericope, God had declared that he was going to make a new covenant, the reason being that the former was broken. The sons of Israel had always gone after other gods, even soon after the covenant was made and the commandments were given on mount Sinai, yet the covenant was not considered broken until now. The reason given by Mendenhall was the exile. Going into exile rendered the old covenant non-functional. He said:

It should first be noted that in the ancient concepts of the covenant the ultimate cause for breach of the covenant was the destruction or scattering of the body-politic with which the covenant was initially formed... Thus the old covenant was no more theoretically; there was no longer any body-politic to which the covenant could apply.

Going into exile actually rendered the covenant inoperative, it thus marks the end of the Sinai covenant, so God is justified in making a new covenant.² The exile was caused by the sins of the people, so they are still responsible for the breaking of the covenant. The new covenant will be made with a newly formed people.

The new covenant when it is made will be the third covenant God is making with the people of Israel as a body; earlier on there was the covenant with Abraham, the Sinai covenant; and then this new covenant. The new covenant has the former covenants as its points of departure, yet it is different from them. The essential elements are almost all the same: the prerogative of the covenant is God's, it is made with the house of Israel, God will be their God and they will be his people, but one of the major differences is in the sign of the covenant which the people are to keep. For the covenant with Abraham, the sign was the circumcision, for the Sinai covenant, it was the Law and the Ark, but "interiorization may constitute the new element in (the) *berit*." The heart of the Israelites according to the prophets were made of stone (Ezk 11, 19, 36, 26), since it would not listen to God, God has decided to write his law on their heart.

Each covenant had its benefit: procreation was that of the covenant with Abraham; settling in the promised land that of the Sinai; forgiveness of sins is the benefit of the new covenant. For the survival of the covenant, God has introduced this new dimension into his relationship with the house of Israel. Since the covenant is in the heart of the individual, wherever the individual finds himself, as long as he is alive, the covenant stands, binding and operative.

The aim of the pericope is to give a hope of a better future to the suffering sons of Israel. That they will return to their land and to their God, but their return will be a new beginning. This return, S. R. Hopper in his exposition of the new covenant, explains thus, "The images of 'return' are not a return to that which has been; they are a return to the Source of that which has been."⁴ The newness of the covenant is that God has changed his mode of relating with the sons of Israel, he is no longer the God who keeps a record of their sins, punishes them from one generation to another, but a God who forgives their sins and remembers their offences no more.

RELATIONSHIP WITH NEW TESTAMENT

This passage of Jeremiah is the only place in the whole of the Old Testament where new covenant is mentioned. For this reason, some scholars declare that "it represents one of the deepest insights of the whole O.T."¹ Two different groups, namely, the Qumran community and the Christians have taken up the idea of the new covenant and have found its fulfilment in them.

For the Qumran community, the new covenant did not mean more than a return to the Mosaic Law and its legalistic tendencies. The Christians on the other hand, read a deeper meaning into the idea of the new covenant.

In the New Testament, the idea of the new covenant is taken up in three principal areas: the synoptic gospels, Pauline letters and the letter to the Hebrews.

The Synoptics

References to the covenant are found in Mt 26, 26-28; Mk 14, 22-25 and Lk. 22, 17-20. All the synoptic gospels speak about the covenant; Matthew and some manuscripts of Mark talk about the covenant, while other manuscripts of Mark and Luke talk specifically about the new covenant, but all the three gospels agree that Christ was instituting a covenant during the last supper. Being Jews, one would conclude that the disciples understood the action of Christ as referring to and fulfilling the New Covenant predicted by Jeremiah, though this is not specifically mentioned by any of the Gospels.

Another idea taken from the pericope on the new covenant by the gospels is that of forgiveness of sins. Christ specifically said he was instituting a new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. The phrase "days are coming" found in the book of Jeremiah puts the arrival of the covenant in an eschatological context. It means the covenant will be realised in the Messianic age, a role that is fulfilled by Christ.

One may conclude that there is no doubt that the synoptics understood the new covenant established by Jesus as the fulfilment of the new covenant predicted by Jeremiah. This view was supported by Heilm when he said: "Jesus conceived of His Messianic work fulfilled in His death from the standpoint of the fulfilment of the prophecy of an eschatological *diaspore*."

Pauline Epistles

References to the covenant occur in I Cor 11, 23-26 and II Cor 3, 3, 6. In the first passage, Paul was recounting the institution of the Eucharist. He quoted the tradition he received as saying "This cup is the New Covenant in my blood" (I Cor 11, 25). In the second passage, Paul made allusion to Jer. 31, 33 when he presents the faithful as the letters of Christ, a letter written with the spirit on the tablets of human hearts (II Cor 3, 3). In v. 6 of the same chapter, Paul considers Christians as

ministers of a new covenant, a covenant not written in code but in the spirit. The Spirit that dwells in the hearts of the believers teaches them the code of the new covenant. This is one of the basic theologies of Paul; that the Spirit instructs the believer, an idea found in the pericope of Jeremiah on the new covenant. One can then conclude that for Paul, Christ did not only establish the new covenant but he was also the fulfilment of the prophecy of Jeremiah.

The letter to the Hebrews

The letter to the Hebrews has three passages on the New Covenant: Heb 8,7-9,28; 10,16-17; 12,24. The first passage speaks at length on the new covenant. It quotes the whole pericope of Jeremiah in 8,8-12 with only a slight difference in v.32. The author again quotes Jer 31,34 in chapter 10,16-17. For the author of this letter, Christ came to establish the new covenant. To him, Jesus was the fulfilment of the prophecies especially this prophecy of Jeremiah. For this reason, the author said, "... Jesus, the Mediator of a new covenant" (Heb 12,24).

CONCLUSION

The synoptic Gospels present the mission of Jesus as the establishment of a new era. That he came to establish a covenant between God and man. Jesus himself was aware of this and his words over the cup at the last supper make this very clear. The early Church, especially Paul and his Church, was aware of this fact too. The writer and the addressee of the Letter to the Hebrew also share this view. It is from these that Behm concludes, "the task of Jesus as He (Jesus) sees it, is to execute a new decree which God has published, to settle the relation between Himself and man".

The passage of Jeremiah talks about putting his law into the hearts of man. This prophecy was neither fulfilled in the Old Testament nor was it recorded as fulfilled among the Jews in the intertestamental time. It was only fulfilled in the time of Christ in the new people of God formed by him. In the gospel of John, Jesus was reported as having said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." (Jn 13,34) The law of love is written in the heart not on a tablet. That is the reason why Christ himself said: "By this shall all know that you are my disciples if you love one another". This gives credit to the claims of the Christians that they are the people of the New Covenant.

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