

“New Covenant”

Jeremiah 31:31–34; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26; Ephesians 2:14–22

A new covenant, written on our hearts, not on stone tablets

New life, new heart, and now . . . new covenant. The word translated “covenant” is *bērīt* in the Hebrew, occurring 286 times in the Old Testament. But only once in the Old Testament is there a reference to a “new covenant,” the Jeremiah passage above. A “covenant” is akin to a contract or an agreement between two parties. Laban and Jacob make a covenant as do Jonathan and David. But a covenant in the Bible isn’t quite the same as a contract. Elmer Martens offers a good suggestion: think of a contract as “thing-oriented” but a covenant as “people-oriented.” And the *bērīt* that matters most is the covenant between God and his people made at Mt. Sinai after the flight from Egypt.



There, at the foot of the mountain, God made a covenant with his chosen people after saving them from slavery in Egypt. God taught them how they were to live with God and with one another. The Ten Commandments, written on stone tablets, lay at the heart of God’s instruction for his people. Though the Israelites cherished God’s law and kept the stone tablets in the Ark of the Covenant, they proved unwilling to live as God had taught them; unable to live in right relationship, truly loving God and loving neighbor.

The consequences of the people’s endless abandonment of God and God’s ways culminate in the death of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. Nonetheless, God, through his prophet Jeremiah, promised his people that the day would come when his law, his instruction to them, would no longer be written on the tablets of stone given to Moses, but on the very hearts of his people. God’s people would no longer even have to teach on another about God, for they would all know God. God would forgive their faithlessness and not even remember their sin. This would be God’s new covenant with his people.

If Israel’s sins in the past brought such fearful judgment upon the nation so that it came close to total annihilation, what assurance can there be that after a future restoration has taken place the same fate will not befall Israel again? The theologically conceived response to this is that God will, by the very creative power of his love, write the law of the covenant upon the hearts of the men and women who make up Israel. This is to be understood as a radically new type of covenant (cf. G. von Rad, *Theology*, Vol. 2, pp. 212–213). The old covenant of the law is dead; instead there will be an inner power and motivation towards obedience on the part of Israel written on the very hearts of the People of God, not on tablets of stone. Although the word “spirit” is not used [here in Jeremiah, though it is used in parallel passages in Ezekiel], the implication is certainly that God’s Spirit will move the hearts of Israel to be obedient to the divine law.¹

The Last Supper and the New Covenant

Symbols can be emotionally potent, sometimes enormously so. In his ministry, Jesus’ actions were often powerfully symbolic. He ate with the oppressed and the despised to demonstrate that all persons were welcome in God’s kingdom. He healed the sick to demonstrate that in God’s kingdom the lame would walk and the blind would see. In sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus would reshape cherished Jewish symbols and hopes, applying them to himself and his ministry.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem a few days before, entering the city as a returning king, to waving palms and chanting crowds. Now, after sundown on Thursday, the evening of his arrest and trial, Jesus gathered his disciples together so they could share the Passover meal within the city walls.

The Passover meal was eaten by a family. Here, Jesus and the twelve disciples make up the family. The head of the household would offer thanks for the “bread of affliction,” (Deut. 16:3). But Jesus identifies the bread with himself – with his suffering for his disciples. The Passover lamb was the seal of the covenant between God and his people, a covenant that had been written on tablets of stone. Jesus reminds his disciples of the new covenant, to be written on hearts, which had been promised centuries before in the scroll of Jeremiah. Jesus is

¹ Clements, R. E. (1988). *Jeremiah* (p. 190). Atlanta, GA: J. Knox Press.

the “mediator of a better covenant . . . enacted through better promises” (Hebrew 8:6), a covenant sealed with Jesus’ own blood. Is it any wonder that early Christians came to embrace the sacredness of the Lord’s Supper?

The earliest record of the communion meal is not from the gospels, rather, it is Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, written more than a decade before Mark. There are lots of problems with the communion meal in Corinth; for one, the rich are eating all their food in private and leaving little for the poorer among them. Paul seeks to help them understand the meaning of this holy meal:

Thus, in Paul’s rendering of the tradition, two closely linked themes stand out: the sharing of the Supper calls the community to think of Jesus’ death for others, and that death is understood to initiate a new covenant (v. 25; cf. Jer. 31:31–34). To be in covenant relation with God is to belong to a covenant people bound together by responsibilities to God and to one another; the character of this new covenant should be shown forth in the sharing of the meal. The trouble with the Corinthians is that they are celebrating the Supper in a way that disregards this structure of covenant obligations and demonstrates an odd amnesia about Jesus’ death. By showing contempt for those who have nothing, they are acting as though his death had not decisively changed the conditions of their relationship to one another.²

We are people of this new covenant. God has put within us a new heart and a new Spirit (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26). We may not always feel this way or act like it, but we are not alone. God is with us. Jesus has ushered in the new covenant foreseen centuries before by Jeremiah.

The community of New Covenant people

Who are we? We are people of this new covenant. We, the body of Christ, are a covenantal community, bound by covenant to God and to one another. In Paul’s words, we have all been reconciled . . . as one body . . . to God by the cross and God is building us into a place where God lives through the Spirit (Ephesians 2:16, 22).

This “people-oriented” agreement God has made with us means that, as Bishop N. T. Wright writes, “it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself,” for all those who have faith in Christ are born anew, new creations born into God’s creation, the church. As another wise and informed Christian, whose name escapes me, wrote, “There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship to the church.” To put it another way, we can’t expect to have a healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with his Body. And to put a finer edge on the theology, all believers are part of the Body of Christ, whether they are present or absent.

You see, we humans are built for relationship, for community. We are made in the image of God, who, in his very being, is inherently relational, an eternal loving fellowship of three persons; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, it is in covenantal community with one another, believer to believer, that we discover the best within us and learn what it really means to be God’s people.

In his important book, *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, Richard Hays proposes that there are three focal images in the New Testament that cut across all the diverse writings: community, cross, and new creation. We’ll close with a bit from Hays on community:

The church is a counterculture community of discipleship, and this community is the primary addressee of God’s imperatives. The biblical story focuses on God’s design for forming a covenant people. Thus, the primary sphere of moral concern is not the character of the individual but the corporate obedience of the church. Paul’s formulation in Romans 12:1-2 encapsulates the vision: “Present your bodies [*smata*, plural] as a living sacrifice [*thysian*, singular], holy and well-pleasing to God. And do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Hays’ translation). The community, in its corporate life, is called to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of God’s redemptive purposes in the world. Thus, “community” is not merely a concept; as the term is used here, it points to the concrete social manifestation of the people of God.³

² Hays, R. B. (1997). *First Corinthians* (p. 199). Louisville, KY: John Knox Press

³ Hays, Richard. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation. A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethic* (Kindle Locations 5443-5450). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.