

Eschatological Problems X: The New Covenant with Israel

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The New Testament by its very name proclaims the universal recognition that a new covenant was made by our Lord Jesus Christ. The title, applied to all the books of the Bible written after Christ, stands in contrast to the Old Testament or Old Covenant. In common parlance, the term *New Testament* has become almost a cliché, used to represent the books as such rather than their content. The term is, however, Biblical and fraught with great significance. Its interpretation bears on soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology in particular, and it colors theology as a whole.

The particular aspect of the new covenant considered here is the relation of the new covenant to Israel, specifically, the question of whether the new covenant promised Israel in the Old Testament will have literal fulfillment. In the hours of Israel's apostasy and departure from God, the prophets mingled their predictions of dire judgment with glowing promises of a future in which Israel would have spiritual and temporal well-being. The interpretation of these promises in its relation to Christian doctrine is an important and determinative eschatological problem.

Like other Old Testament prophecies relating to Israel, the promises of a new covenant for Israel have received widely differing interpretations. Schools of interpretation have divided according to well-defined patterns corresponding to systems of eschatology. The postmillennial view of eschatology, for instance, finds the promises of the new covenant for Israel fulfilled in blessing on Jews who believe in Christ. Some, like Charles Hodge, who inclines to a literal interpretation of God's promises, believe the Jewish people as a whole will come into blessing in the church through believing in Christ, thereby, according to this theory, fulfilling the promises.¹ In other words, the postmillennial theory believes the promises will be fulfilled in this present age to Jews who believe in Christ.

The amillennial theory of eschatology differs somewhat from the postmillennial view. Its thesis is that the church as a whole, composed of both Jew and Gentile, is the true Israel, and therefore takes over bodily the blessings promised to Israel. Hence, the new covenant for Israel is, in fact, identical to the new covenant with the church and fulfilled in it. Dr. Oswald T. Allis states the position concisely when he writes, "For the gospel age in which we are living is that day foretold by the prophets when the law of God shall be written in the hearts of men (Jer. xxxi.33) and when the Spirit of God abiding in their hearts will enable them to keep it (Ezek. xi.19 , xxxvi.26f)."² In contrast to the postmillennial theory which finds fulfillment for the new covenant for Israel in blessing on the Jewish people in the church, Dr. Allis in stating the amillennial position transfers the promises to the entire church. Both of these theories find fulfillment of the new covenant in the present age only.

The premillennial theory of eschatology offers a more complex system of interpretation. Three types of interpretation are offered, the first two of which have no real difference. The third

¹ 1. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1909), p. 589.

² 2. *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1945), p. 42.

stands in rather sharp distinction to the others. The first premillennial theory and the most common is that popularized in the *Scofield Reference Bible*.³ It presents the new covenant with Israel and the church as being essentially one covenant, based on the sacrifice of Christ, but having a twofold application. It is applied to the church in this age, that is, to all who believe in Christ. It will have a future application in a literal millennium after the return of Christ when the promises given to Israel will be fulfilled. The new covenant under this theory has both a present and a future fulfillment, a present application to the church, a future application to Israel. The advantage of this interpretation is that it allows a full literal interpretation of God's promises to Israel which is impossible in the postmillennial and amillennial theories.

Another form of premillennial interpretation is that which distinguishes the new covenant with Israel from the new covenant with the church. In other words, it finds two new covenants. The new covenant with Israel is new in contrast to the Mosaic covenant of the Old Testament. The new covenant for the church is new in contrast to the Adamic or old covenant for the church as a whole. Both new covenants are based on the sacrifice of Christ, but the promises belonging to the church and to Israel are sharply distinguished. It is apparent that while this approach to the problem makes a sharper distinction between Israel and the church, it does not differ essentially from the more common premillennial interpretation.

A third theory is suggested which limits the term *new covenant* to a covenant with Israel to be fulfilled in the millennium.⁴ In other words, the only new covenant is the one belonging to Israel and the only fulfillment is future. The church in the present age has a covenant or system of promises through the death of Christ, but it is not specifically a new covenant. This approach to the problem of interpretation is not generally held by premillennialists. The three premillennial views offer three degrees of distinction, the last being one extreme of which the amillennial view is the other.

The Determining Issue

The solution of the problem involved in the new covenant with Israel hinges on several determinative issues: (1) Are all the promises given to Israel under the new covenant being fulfilled in the present age? If they are, then the postmillennial and amillennial interpretations may be correct. If the promises are not being fulfilled now and cannot be fulfilled under conditions in the present age, then a future fulfillment is called for, and the premillennial interpretation is justified. (2) How does the New Testament use the term *new covenant*? This approach should confirm findings under the first question and give a ground for certain conclusions. (3) What is the explicit teaching of the New Testament about the *new covenant*? The new covenant with Israel is specifically quoted in the New Testament and conclusions drawn from it. How do these passages fit into the doctrine as a whole? The answer to these questions should in a large measure determine the answer to the problem.

The Promises of the New Covenant with Israel

The major passage in the Old Testament and the only one to use the specific term *new covenant* is found in Jeremiah 31:31–34: “Behold, the days come, saith Jehovah, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not according to the

³ 3. Pp. 1297-8, note.

⁴ 4. Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was a husband unto them, saith Jehovah. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith Jehovah: I will put my law in their inward parts, and in their hearts will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know Jehovah; for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith Jehovah: for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more.”

The issue being considered is whether these promises are now being fulfilled to the church or to the Jews in the church in this age. In this light, the provisions of the covenant are to be noted in the following particulars: (1) It is specifically a covenant with “the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.” (2) It is contrasted with the Mosaic covenant which also was with Israel only and not with any other people. (3) The covenant will be fulfilled “after those days,” i.e., after the days of judgment and affliction described in the preceding context. (4) The Law is to be written in their hearts, in their “inward parts”—in contrast to the Mosaic law which was written in tables of stone. (5) Jehovah will be their God and Israel will be His people—this relationship will be mutually and publicly recognized by both parties. (6) There will be no need to proclaim the truth concerning Jehovah as all will know Him, “from the least of them unto the greatest of them.” (7) Their sins will be forgiven and remembered no more.

While certain aspects of this covenant correspond to spiritual blessings realized by the people of God in this age, it is not difficult to see that the provisions of the covenant are not fulfilled in any literal sense in this age. Those who follow the amillennial or postmillennial interpretations freely admit the need for a spiritual or non-literal interpretation. Even in a spiritual interpretation, however, it is necessary to assign meaning to the symbols used and statements made. The covenant is specifically made with Israel—a name which is never used in the New Testament in reference to Gentiles, as brought out in previous articles on eschatological problems. The covenant provides that God will be their God and Israel shall be His people. Obviously this involves more than ever existed in the Old Testament. It is a relationship to Israel *as a group* and premises a public manifestation of God’s blessing on them. Certainly this has no fulfillment in the present day or in any period since apostolic times. A most distinctive promise is that “all” will know Jehovah. This has never been true of the world and is not true today. The church in the world is given a commission to proclaim the Gospel to a world that knows not God, to teach the truth to those who have believed in Him. There is no evidence whatever that the day will ever come when all will know Jehovah until the full revelation is given by the personal return of Christ. The argument that this covenant is fulfilled in the present age hinges then on spiritualizing the key words, viz., *Israel*, and ignoring some of the most striking aspects of the covenant.

While Jeremiah 31:31–34 is the only reference specifically to the new covenant with Israel in the Old Testament, it cannot be doubted that many other passages refer to the same covenant, particularly the expression *everlasting covenant*. In this description its character as unconditional and eternal is emphasized instead of its difference in quality to the Mosaic covenant. All of God’s covenants with Israel except the Mosaic are described as *everlasting*, and it is necessary to consider the context to determine the reference in each case. In most instances the reference is clear.

In Isaiah 61:8, 9, certain aspects of the new covenant are emphasized and enlarged: “...I will make an everlasting covenant with them. And their seed shall be known among the nations, and

their offspring among the peoples: all that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which Jehovah hath blessed.” Here is confirmed and enlarged what is revealed later, chronologically, by Jeremiah. Israel is to be publicly blessed before all the peoples of the world. As in the Jeremiah passage, these promises follow the predictions of judgment and are associated with Israel’s restoration as a nation and restoration to their land.

Jeremiah himself adds to the new covenant in 32:37–40 of his prophecy. The same features as appear in the new covenant are reiterated: (1) Israel is to be God’s people; (2) a changed heart; (3) God will do them good forever. Some additions to the covenant are also brought out clearly. The fulfillment of the new covenant is conditioned on the regathering of Israel from their world-wide dispersion (Jer 32:37) and their permanent establishing in their ancient land (Jer 32:41). These additions are important because there is nothing in the present age which fulfills these prophecies even spiritually.

The prophet Ezekiel adds his word of revelation confirming the provisions of the new covenant with Israel (Ezek 37:21–28). The same elements appear as in previous passages: (1) Israel’s regathering as the preliminary work of God; (2) Israel to be one nation, ruled by one king; (3) Israel to be delivered from idolatry, cleansed, forgiven; (4) Israel to dwell in the land given unto Jacob and their possession is confirmed to continue “forever”; (5) Israel to have an everlasting covenant of peace; (6) Israel to have the tabernacle of God with them; (7) Israel to be known among the heathen as a nation God is blessing.

A survey of the promises in the new covenant as contained in Jeremiah and as revealed by Isaiah and Ezekiel brings out clearly that nothing in the history of the present age comes even near to fulfilling the promises given to Israel. The factors which are in the context of the major passages are lacking. Israel has not been regathered, not brought as a whole to Jehovah, not blessed as a nation before the world, does not possess the land, does not have one heart to serve the Lord, is not forever secure from departure from God, does not know the Lord from the least to the greatest. There is no justification in these passages for the idea that the church as a whole fulfills the covenant. These passages teach and the Jews at the time understood them to mean that God would fulfill them literally. Upon such promises rest the whole hope of the Jews as a nation, and their fulfillment is joined to the faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God.

Use of the Term New Covenant in the New Testament

Inasmuch as the New Testament is an inspired commentary on the Old Testament, the way in which the term *new covenant* is used in the New Testament is an important aspect of the doctrine. The term *new covenant*, *καινή διαθήκη*, is found five times in the New Testament in undisputed passages (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8; 9:15).

It is variously translated *new covenant* and *new testament*. It is found in some texts in Matthew 26:28 and Mark 14:24, and the word *new* obviously referring to the new covenant is found in Hebrews 8:13. The expression *διαθήκη νέα* also translated *new covenant* is found in Hebrews 12:24, where it brings out that the covenant is not only new in quality as contained in *καινή*, which is used in the other references, but also that the covenant is *recent* in its beginning.

There are many references to Israel’s covenants in the New Testament. The Abrahamic covenant is mentioned frequently (Luke 1:72; Acts 3:25; 7:8 ; Gal 3:17; 4:24 ; Heb 8:9). In other instances the Mosaic covenant is indicated (2 Cor 3:14; Heb 9:4, 15, 20; Rev 11:19). General references to Israel’s covenants are also made (Rom 9:4; Eph 2:12). In some instances the new covenant is clearly in view though the word *new* is not mentioned (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Rom

11:27; Heb 8:10). The body of these Scriptures provides the basis for a New Testament study of the problem of Israel's new covenant.

Of the five references to the new covenant in the New Testament, two have reference to the Lord's Supper, one refers to the new covenant as that which Paul ministered, one refers to the new covenant with Israel, and the final passage reveals that Christ is the mediator of the new covenant. The fact that the term refers to the Lord's Supper which is for both Jew and Gentile is a clear indication that the new covenant as referred to in the New Testament is not entirely Jewish. In fact, only one reference clearly relates the term *new covenant* to Israel, and this is found in Hebrews 8:8. A study of this reference and its context is the key to the New Testament revelation on the new covenant with Israel.

New Testament Teaching on the New Covenant with Israel

The Epistle to the Hebrews by its title is addressed to the Jewish people. The epistle is planned to show that Christ and Christian doctrine supersedes Moses and the Mosaic covenant. The argument in Hebrews eight proceeds on the revelation that Christ is mediator of a better covenant than Moses, established on better promises. At this point, the writer shows that the Mosaic covenant was never intended to be eternal (in contrast to other Jewish covenants) and that the Old Testament itself anticipated the day of its passing. To prove this point, the passage from Jeremiah on the new covenant is quoted (Heb 8:8–12). The quotation is not an exact translation of the Hebrew, but the variations are not significant in the general argument. The writer of Hebrews points out that the word *new* in itself shows that the Mosaic covenant was to end. He declares that the Mosaic covenant is now about to vanish away.

The Hebrews eight passage has been the center of controversy on the fulfillment of the new covenant with Israel. The amillennialist insists that here is positive proof that the church fulfills the covenant given to Israel. Dr. Oswald T. Allis, for instance, states: "The passage speaks of the new covenant. It declares that this new covenant has been already introduced and that by virtue of the fact it is called 'new' it has made the one which it is replacing 'old,' and that the old is about to vanish away. It would be hard to find a clearer reference to the gospel age in the Old Testament than in these verses in Jeremiah."⁵

Dr. Allis has stated well the amillennial position, and has also himself indicated its fallacy, in the opinion of the writer, by begging the question. He states that the Hebrews passage "declares that this new covenant has been already introduced."⁶ The passage states that a "better covenant" than the Mosaic covenant has been introduced (Heb 8:6), but it does not state here or anywhere else that this better covenant is identical with the "new covenant with the house of Israel," or that the new covenant with Israel has been introduced. The argument of the passage does not hinge on this point at all, but rather on whether the Old Testament in any way anticipated an end to the Mosaic covenant. This the Old Testament does, but it does not follow that the new covenant of the Old Testament is identical with the better covenant of Hebrews.

There is no appeal at all to the content of the new covenant with Israel as being identical with the better covenant of which Hebrews speaks. The very absence of such an appeal is as strong as any argument from silence can be. It would have been a crushing blow to the opponents of the

⁵ 5. *Op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁶ 6. *Idem.*

Christian order among the Jews to be faced with a quotation which described in detail the promises of God to the church. The writer instead merely refers to the word *new* and goes on to show in Hebrews nine how the Christian order superseded the sacraments of the Mosaic covenant.

Dr. Allis has, however, done premillennialism a service in demanding consistency on interpretation of this passage. Either the church fulfills the new covenant with Israel or it does not. While the writer has great respect for the Biblical scholarship of Dr. C. I. Scofield, he is inclined to agree with Dr. Allis that Scofield is not clear on this point in his *Scofield Reference Bible*. It is more consistent with the whole premillennial position to hold that the new covenant realized to-day by the church is different than the new covenant with the house of Israel than to hold that it fulfills it in part. The issue, after all, is whether the church inherits Israel's promises. If it inherits any of them, the door is left open to the amillennial position. The proper doctrine is rather that while many of the blessings of the church are similar to those promised Israel, the promises to Israel remain intact to be fulfilled entirely by Israel. While the church may claim promises specified in the "new covenant" when it is not identified with Israel's new covenant, it should remain on its own ground of blessing in Christ.

Another problem of interpretation may be mentioned, though Dr. Allis does not refer to it. In Hebrews 10:16, 17, a further reference is made to the new covenant with Israel. Here the argument is on the question of whether the sacrifice of Christ supersedes the sacrifices of the Mosaic covenant. Appeal is made to the new covenant with Israel in that it promises that sins will be forgiven and remembered no more. As in any sin-offering the sins are remembered, this would require a sacrifice once and for all, as provided in Christ. Again, it should be noted that there is no statement that the new covenant with Israel is identical with the new covenant for the church.

In Romans 11:26, 27, a confirmation of the conclusions reached in the study of Hebrews eight is found. Here the new covenant with the house of Israel is quoted in part and referred to the future national restoration of Israel, as has been discussed in previous articles.⁷ If Romans 11:25, 26 refer to a future restoration of Israel as a nation, an event distinct from God's program for the church, then the New Testament itself interprets Jeremiah 31:31-34 as referring to a future time. In other words, while Hebrews eight does not make any statement on the time of fulfillment of the new covenant with Israel, the Romans passage states this definitely. We may conclude that the New Testament does not ever state that the new covenant with Israel is now being fulfilled, but rather that it specifies that it will be fulfilled at the time of Israel's restoration as a nation, in that day when "all Israel shall be saved."

Conclusions

While it has not been possible within the limits of this discussion to consider all aspects of the doctrine, certain important conclusions have been reached. The promises given to Israel in the form of a new covenant were found to remain unfulfilled to this hour. Any literal interpretation of the passages requires events and circumstances which are not a part of this age. Both the postmillennial and amillennial views were shown to depend upon spiritualizing the key words and important statements of the passage. Of the three views held by premillennialists, the view that the new covenant is exclusively and only for Israel was rejected. The use of the term

⁷ Cf. *Bibliotheca Sacra*, July-September 1945, pp. 280-290, October-December 1945, pp. 405-416.

new covenant in connection with the Lord's Supper as celebrated by both Jews and Gentiles in the church was taken as evidence. Of the remaining views, the position that there are two new covenants, one for Israel to be fulfilled in the millennium and another for the church in this age, was found preferable. The sacrifice of Christ is the basis of any gracious covenant and remains the ground for fulfillment of God's promised mercies both for the church and for the nation Israel.

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