

EXPOSITIONAL PAPER: HEBREWS

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by

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THE NEW COVENANT IN HEBREWS

Introduction/Historical-Cultural Background

Attorneys have to be masters of their craft. They are responsible for presenting a case before a court and swaying them to make a decision in their favor. The case they present must be compelling, but all the facts have to make sense and be well proven. A tiny bit of doubt about any piece of evidence may not result in it being dismissed by the court, but it may sway the court in an unfavorable direction.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews¹ was just as masterful in presenting his case. He begins by making a case for the superiority of Jesus over to the ways of their ancestors. He states that Jesus is greater than the angels, greater than Moses, and greater than the priests, for He “was designated by God as high priest in the order of Melchizedek”(Hebrews 5:10). He is “a priest forever” of a permanent priesthood who does more than intercede to God on behalf of humanity; He is “able to save completely those who come to God through Him” (Hebrews 7:17, 24-25). The author offers evidence from the Old Testament and makes a compelling argument clearly tying Jesus to the promises given to the Hebrew people. Once the author has made his case for the superiority of Jesus, he makes one more major connection: Jesus fulfills the promise of the New Covenant. From there, the author concludes his letter with instructions for how these followers of Christ should practically respond in faith, worship and life.

The author interwove five warnings for his audience, but those warnings would not have meant much if his case was not solid. He encouraged them to not drift away from their faith because what they believe in is superior (Heb 2:1-4). He called them to watch out for unbelief because what they put their faith in was credible (Heb 3:12-19). He warned them not to be sluggish by reverting to elementary teaching since they already have the knowledge that brought them to

¹ *NET Bible*, (n.p.: Biblical Studies Press, 2001), Hebrews; All scripture notes are cited from The NET Bible unless otherwise noted.

salvation (Heb 5:11-6:12). He challenged them to not leave the faith because there is nowhere else to go to (Heb 10:26-31). And he cautioned them about rejecting God's blessings in Christ, the mediator of the New Covenant (Heb 12:14-29). These warnings would not be warnings if the information the author presented was not true. In building a case for the superiority of Christ, the author accomplished his purpose of encouraging Christians to hold fast to their confession of faith in Christ in the midst of temptations to fall away because of persecution.

What is the New Covenant?

What is this New Covenant referred to in Hebrews 8:6-13; 9:15; 12:24? The first statement we find is that this is a "better" covenant that is mediated by Jesus in connection with his "superior ministry" and "enacted on better promises" (Heb 8:6). It becomes clear that this covenant is being compared to another, which is called faulty (Heb 8:7,8). The section that immediately follows this statement of Jesus as mediator of a better covenant is a quote from Jeremiah 31:31-34. In this passage, the comparison becomes more clear.

From the section of Jeremiah that is quoted in the letter to the Hebrews, the Old Covenant is the one that was made with the ancestors of the Jewish people when they were delivered from Egypt by Moses, but they did not keep it (Heb 8:9). This directly connects to the previous section where the writer of Hebrews names Jesus as superior to Moses and to the Law given to Moses. The Covenant of the Law was given with ability for the people of Israel to fail and break the covenant. It was limited. The author of Hebrews calls this covenant "obsolete," "aging" and "about to disappear" (Heb 8:13).

The main emphasis of the quote from Jeremiah in Hebrews is the New Covenant. It is a covenant made with "the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Heb 8:8). But it is God who is enacting the covenant this time. Seven times He states what He will do: "I will complete a new covenant," "I will establish," "I will put," "I will inscribe," "I will be their God," "I will be merciful," "I will remember no longer" (Heb 8:8, 10, 12). He is the one who implements it and makes no statement of what the people must do. The only reference to them is a change in their

identity: the Lord said, “they will be my people” (Heb 8:10). He also removes all obstacles so that every person, “from the least to the greatest,” can “know the Lord” (Heb 8:11).

The author of Hebrews continues on with describing how the “first, or Old, Covenant required sacrifices in an earthly sanctuary (Heb 9:1-10). He, then, contrasts that to how in the New Covenant, Jesus is the high priest who entered the holy place “once for all” where the priests had to enter every year. The priests entered by the blood of animals under the old, but under the new, Jesus entered “by virtue of his own blood” (Heb 9:12).² The New Covenant provides Jesus as the mediator, the priest, and the sacrifice, more perfect and complete than those of the previous covenant. His priesthood is permanent and His sacrifice is “once for all” and “eternal” (Hebrews 7:17, 24; 9:12, 14, 15, 26).³

As the writer of Hebrews continues, he points out just how unlimited Jesus’ sacrifice was. He says, “he died to set them free from the violations committed under the first covenant” (Heb 9:15). He, again, mentions Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant stating that Jesus’ blood “speaks of something better” than the blood of Abel’s does (Heb 12:24). Just a few sentences before, the author reminds us of the gravity in approaching God under the old covenant (Heb 12:20). He then says, “But you have come to Mount Zion...” as if recalling the confidence we now have in approaching God’s throne of grace (Heb 4:16). Comparing the spilled blood of Jesus to the spilled blood of Abel, he first reminds us of how “he still speaks, though he is dead” (Heb 11:4). F. F. Bruce clarifies stating, “Abel’s blood cried out to God from the ground, protesting against his murder and appealing for vindication; but the blood of Christ brings a message of cleansing, forgiveness, and peace with God to all who place their faith in him.”⁴

² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 213.

³ Kenneth G. Hannah, *From Gospels to Glory: Exploring the New Testament*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2014), 395.

⁴ Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 361.

The New Covenant of Hebrews and of Jeremiah

The main passage in Hebrews that speaks of the New Covenant quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34. The new covenant promised to Israel in Jeremiah was limited to what Jeremiah knew at the time from history and from the revelation of God. In the context of his writings, Jeremiah pointed out how the people failed to hold to the covenant given to them through Moses after the Exodus (Ex 20:1-34:28; Deut 28; Jer 7:23-26). Most of what he wrote was to warn the people of what would come as a result of not keeping the covenant. But, in chapter thirty, Jeremiah shifted into a message of hope of restoration and deliverance that involved a New Covenant.

At the time when Jeremiah wrote of the New Covenant, the covenant was for “the people of Israel and Judah” without him knowing that its implications would impact the whole world (Jer 31:31). The emphasis of the covenant are the same as they are when quoted in Hebrews. This New Covenant meant the beginning of a new relationship between God and His people: God embeds His Law in His people; all, from the least to the great, can know God personally; and he will atone for their sins.⁵ So now, because the New Covenant is made in Christ, this new relationship with God is available to all of humanity, not just to the people of Israel (Acts 10:45; 11:18; Rom 11:11-25; Gal 3:8; Eph 3:1-8).

Is the Church the “New Israel”?

I do not believe that the Church is the “New Israel.” If that were the case, then that would mean the Church replaces Israel in who Israel is, what Israel is to do and God’s promises to Israel. And then on a bigger scale, if one concludes that God has replaced Israel with the church, a lot of biblical evidence has to be ignored and the faithfulness of God to keep His promises has to be called into question.⁶ Vlach makes a case against this “replacement theology” with seven points: 1.) “The Bible explicitly teaches the restoration of the nation Israel” (Deut 30:1-6; Jer 16:14-15; 30:1-3; Ez 36:22-30; 37:21-29; Rom 9-11); 2.) “The Bible explicitly

⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁶ Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel? A Theological Evaluation*, (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 201, 205.

promises the perpetuity of the nation Israel” (Jer 31:35-35); 3.) “The NT reaffirms a future restoration for the nation Israel” (Matt 19:28; 23:37-39; Luke 13:35; 21:24; 22:30; Acts 1:6-7; Rom 11); 4.) “The NT reaffirms that the OT promises and covenants to Israel are still the possession of Israel” (Acts 3:11-26; Rom 9:3-4); 5.) “New Testament prophecy affirms a future for Israel” (Matt 24:15-20; Luke 21; 2 Thess 2; Rev 7:4-8); 6.) “The NT maintains a distinction between Israel and the church.” (Acts); and 7.) “The doctrine of election is proof that God has a future for Israel.”⁷

In regards to the Hebrews 8 passage, Vlach points out that the New Covenant is not a part of the Old Testament being reinterpreted by a New Testament writer, as supersessionists, who hold to the “replacement theology,” want to argue.⁸ Supersessionists claim that this passage is evidence that the church is the new Israel since the New Covenant is fulfilled with the church.⁹ Vlach shreds this argument with several points but the main one being that “the writer of Hebrews is stressing that the superior new covenant has replaced the old covenant” and that the relationship between Israel and the church is not being addressed.¹⁰ He, as well as Bruce, conclude that the unified salvation of Jews and Gentiles still allows for distinctions between the two and a special role for Israel.¹¹

Conclusion/Application

The writer of Hebrews was compelled to make a case that clarifies the old from the new that came with Christ. One of the specific things that he focused on was the New Covenant. As we have looked at what it is, how it connects to the Old, the promises from the Old Testament as to what it was to be, and how that informs the relationship between the Church and Israel, the

⁷ *Ibid.*, 177-201.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 204-5; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 195.

relevance of these passages are not limited to just these questions. We need to take into consideration how these passages about the New Covenant are relevant to believers today.

The first question believers today need to answer in light of this passage is, “Am I in this New Covenant and how did I get there?” Only through Jesus can one enter into the New Covenant of His blood that was shed once for all (Luke 22:20; Heb 9:11-15). Then, a next question could be, “What is true of me because of this New Covenant?” And, “How does my life reflect this New Covenant with God?”

For believers in Christ Jesus, the New Covenant is the work of God on our behalf, through Jesus Christ, so that we can be restored to a right relationship with God. Through Jesus, our sins are forgiven because of His perfect sacrifice, and He serves as our High Priest, interceding on our behalf (Heb 4:14-15; 7:17, 24-25; 9:11-15, 22-24). Because of Him, we now have an eternal inheritance with Him (Rom 8:16-17; Heb 9:15).

For me, the New Covenant, in Hebrews 8, is a reminder of God’s grace. I was an atheist until I was nineteen years old and was unfamiliar with the teachings of the Bible such as the Law and God’s presence. Until that point, all I knew of Christianity was misconception: you had to be a good person and do good things to get to heaven. I dismissed it, along with all other religious ideas, because the list of do’s and don’t’s to be a good person reminded me of the rules that governments require of people to be good citizens. When the gospel was finally shared with me, it was the concept of grace that struck me most. God had to do something on my behalf to save me from myself. I did not and cannot deserve His forgiveness and restoration. Grace is an undeserved favor.

The beauty of the New Covenant, to me, is all the “I will” statements. In the passage in Hebrews 8 where Jeremiah 31 is quoted, God says “I will” seven times. I am reminded that I do nothing as part of this covenant with God. He is the One who has done it all for me and for all of us. I know I can contribute nothing and will never measure up, so I am filled with gratitude as I continue to learn more about the New Covenant and what it means for my life.

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