

New Covenant Considerations

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Introduction

Years ago in my seminary education, I remember a professor making the statement about the importance and problem of the New Covenant (NC) for Dispensationalism. If memory serves me correctly, he said that Dr. Chafer was offering a doctorate (honorary?) to anyone who could adequately deal with the problem of the relationship of the Church to the NC. All agreed that the covenant was made “with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” But if the church “fulfilled” in some way this covenant, the distinction between the Church and Israel, a central tenet in Dispensationalism, could be severely if not critically compromised. Even then, this potential was recognized as a substantive problem for Dispensationalism.

Classically, covenant amillennialism has claimed that the Church today is “fulfilling” the NC according to the New Testament. This assertion has then been used to argue that promises given to Israel in the Old Testament are now being fulfilled by the Church since, in that position, this is true of the NC. “When a prophecy is destined to be fulfilled in the new dispensation, it is fulfilled according to the spirit of that new era. Hence, the Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in the Spirit-filled church.”¹ Those who hold this position see it as eliminating an earthly future for a redeemed, ethnic Israel in a future earthly kingdom on the present earth.²

Dispensational views on the New Covenant.

There has certainly been no unanimity in premillennial or dispensational responses in addressing this problem. Walvoord summarizes some of the varied understandings:

¹ Stanley Grenz, *The Millennial Maze : Sorting out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 155 citing Hendricksen.

² Presently some amillennialists do argue for a future fulfillment these Old Testament land prophecies but they will be fulfilled in the New Heavens and New Earth (Rev. 21-22).

The premillennial view popularized by the *Scofield Reference Bible* regards the new covenant as having a twofold application, first to Israel fulfilled in the millennium, and, second, to the church in the present age.

Another point of view is taken by Lewis Sperry Chafer who believes the new covenant in the Old Testament will be fulfilled only in the millennium, but finds also another new covenant revealed in the New Testament which has reference to the church in the present age. This conceives the sacrifice of Christ as making possible two covenants, a new covenant for Israel as well as a new covenant for the church. This view has the advantage of not complicating the promises given expressly to Israel with promises given to the church.

A third position, also premillennial, was advocated by J. N. Darby who held that the new covenant belonged to Israel alone in both Old and New Testaments though the church participates in the benefits of the sacrifice of Christ. Darby holds that "the gospel is not a covenant, but the revelation of the salvation of God."

The premillennial view, though varying in details in the interpretation of the new covenant, insists that the new covenant as revealed in the Old Testament concerns Israel and requires fulfillment in the millennial kingdom. This is substantiated by a study of the contents of the covenant.³

³ John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham Pub. Co., 1959), p. 209-10. Walvoord goes on to say: "Premillenarians are in agreement that the new covenant with Israel awaits its complete fulfillment in the millennial kingdom. However, there exists some difference of opinion how the new covenant relates to the present interadvent age. Particular attention is paid to Luke 22:20 and the parallel synoptic passages (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24) where the disciples are introduced to the Lord's Supper and informed that the cup represents the blood of the new covenant. Some premillenarians like Darby¹³ believe the church is related only to the blood of the new covenant-the gracious ground of the new covenant, rather than the new covenant itself. It is true, of course, that the Old Testament covenants in general belonged to Israel, as brought out in Romans 9:4 (d. Eph. 2: 12); Scofield, however, regards the new covenant with Israel as having an oblique reference to the believers of this age, though concerned primarily with Israel.¹⁴ Preference was stated earlier in this study for another view advanced by Lewis Sperry Chafer¹⁵ advocating two new covenants, one for the nation Israel to be fulfilled in the millennium, the other for the church to be fulfilled in the present age.

The point of view that holds to two covenants in the present age has certain advantages. It provides a sensible reason for establishing the Lord's supper for believers in this age in commemoration of the blood of the new covenant. The language of 1 Corinthians 11:25 seems to require it: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood: this do, as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of me." It hardly seems reasonable to expect Christians to distinguish between the cup and the new covenant when these appear to be identified in this passage. In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul speaking of himself states: "Our sufficiency is of God: who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant." It would be difficult to adjust the ministry of Paul as a minister of the new covenant if, in fact, there is no new covenant for the present age. Even Darby, who seems to have originated this idea, states, "We enjoy indeed all the essential privileges of the new covenant, its foundation being laid on God's part in the blood of Christ, but we do so in spirit, not according to the letter."¹⁶ It can be seen that this is not far from Scofield's idea of a double application.

The issues of premillennialism have been focused with increasing sharpness in recent years until the line has been drawn between Israel's promises and those belonging to the church. The concept of two new covenants is a better analysis of the problem and more consistent with premillennialism as a whole. The amillennial argument breaks down, however, not on the basis of these finer distinctions but the obvious failure to find in the present age any literal fulfillment of the covenant with Israel. As in other particulars of prophecy concerning the millennium, a literal fulfillment demands a future millennial dispensation." Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*. pp. 218-19.

So it appears that Dispensationalism (classical/normative) has not spoken with a unified voice concerning the “fulfillment” of the NC. The difficulties to Dispensationalism caused by the interpretation of the NC can also be seen in the fact that various dispensational writers have changed their understanding of the church’s relationship to the NC. As well, the idea of the Church presently “partially fulfilling” the NC has been important in progressive Dispensationalism.⁴

Issues addressed in this paper

In my judgment, understanding NC requires going back to definitions and revisiting the text. To that end, I would like to look at three questions in this discussion:

1. What do we mean by NC?
2. What is meant by “fulfilled” or “partially fulfilled?”
3. What does Jeremiah 31:31-34 mean in its Old Testament context?

It seems to me these three factors are interrelated. A lack of agreed upon meanings has exacerbated the problem of understanding how dispensationalists or anyone else should deal with the “problem” of the Church’s relationship to the NC.

Issue #1

To what does the expression NC refer? Are we using this term “theologically” or only as it used explicitly in the Old Testament text (biblically)?⁵ Let me seek to illustrate the distinction I have in mind. We recognize that terms may have theological meanings which are not identical to the meaning of the words as they are used in Scripture. The use of the term *atonement* in Leviticus 1:4, for instance, does not carry the same meaning as when it is used to speak of the *atonement* of Christ; more than that, the term translated *atonement* in Leviticus is used in Genesis 6:14 with reference to the ark. The same phenomenon occurs with the word *justify*. The theological use of the term includes more than the meaning of the word in Deuteronomy 24.

If one takes the meaning of NC in the Old Testament only from passages that use this terminology, one is left with only one biblical text: Jeremiah 31:31-34. If, however, one determines a definition of NC by connecting the meaning of that text (Jeremiah 31:31-34) with others which may share similar teaching, the scope of the meaning of NC is enlarged by the

⁴ In a personal conversation at an ETS meeting, Darrell Bock indicated the model of fulfillment concerning the NC was the model upon which the Davidic Covenant was being interpreted. At the same time he indicated that the same approach might have some application to the so-called Palestinian covenant.

⁵ I want to begin point #1 by stating my appreciation to David Fredrickson for his kindnesses to me in personally pointing out what I agree is an inconsistency in how I have identified the NC by including Ezekiel 36 as a NC passage. Secondly, he also sent me a copy of his dissertation which has helped me clarify my own thinking.

additional revelation contained in the other texts.⁶ Kaiser illustrates this approach; “The only place in the Old Testament where the expression ‘new covenant’ occurs is Jeremiah 31:31. However it would appear that the idea is much more widespread. Based on similar content and contexts, the following expressions can be equated with the new covenant: the ‘everlasting covenant’ in seven passages,¹⁴ a ‘new heart’ or a ‘new spirit’ in three or four passages,¹⁵ the ‘covenant of peace’ in three passages,¹⁶ and ‘a covenant’ or ‘my covenant which is placed ‘in that day’ in three passages¹⁷—making a grand total of sixteen or seventeen major passages on the new covenant.”⁷

When one is talking about the “fulfillment” of NC in the New Testament, the discussion is governed by how NC is defined. The contradictory answers of dispensational interpreters on the question of NT fulfillment – and the impasse in moving forward with any consensus – may come as a result of differing definitions of NC. Therefore, I propose we limit ourselves to the text both Old and New Testaments identify explicitly as NC⁸ because, though other so-called NC (theological meaning) passages may be “fulfilled” in the New Testament, the crux of the problem with the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament relating to the NC is whether or not the church fulfills prophecies made to Israel in Jeremiah 31:31-34.⁹

Issue #2

Of perhaps equal importance to the meaning of NC is what is meant by the word *fulfillment*. Generally, the word seems to be understood to indicate that something predicted has now happened. It was prophesied Jesus would be born of a virgin and in Bethlehem; when this took place, the prophecy was fulfilled.

But questions arise when the term “partial fulfillment” is used. Does “partial fulfillment” indicate that something has begun to be fulfilled or only part of the larger prophetic unit has been realized? Would the term “fulfill” have a different meaning if one is thinking of an event rather than a process?

⁶ I believe Frederickson’s dissertation, IS ISAIAH’S “SERVANT-COVENANT” THE NEW COVENANT? is an excellent attempt to define NC from a theological perspective.

¹⁴ 14. Jer. 32:40; 50:5; Ezek. 16:60; 37:26; Isa. 24:5; 55:3; 61:8.

¹⁵ 15. Ezek. 11:19; 18:31; 36:26; Jer. 32:39 (LXX).

¹⁶ 16. Isa. 54:10; Ezek. 34:25; 37:26.

¹⁷ 17. Isa. 42:6; 49–8; Hos. 2:18–20; Isa. 59:21. For additional passages on the new covenant see Stefan Porubcan, *Sin in the Old Testament: A Soteriological Study*. Rome: Slovak Institute, 1963, pp. 481-512.

⁷ The Evangelical Theological Society, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Volume 15* (The Evangelical Theological Society, 1972; 2002). 15:14.

⁸ My earlier inconsistency was to also include Ezekiel 36 with no justification. I do think the two texts are related but this then moves the teaching of the NC into the theological and not explicitly biblical category.

⁹ I would like to make it clear I am not saying a discussion of NC being defined theologically is either wrong or misguided. I am simply arguing that unless all agree on how the term NC is used, and all use it the same way, it will be difficult to understand what is being said in terms of “fulfillment” and how this relates to the relationship of the Church to Israel.

Suppose someone prophesies that a house will be built. Could one argue that, after the foundation was laid, a part of the prophecy had been fulfilled and thus the prophecy was partially fulfilled? What would it take to say the prophecy of a house being built has been fulfilled? It seems to me it may depend on whether this prophecy itself refers to a process (building) or an event (house completion).

Or, to expand on the distinction between process and event, is it legitimate to use the term partial fulfillment when the prophecy concerns an event, like the rapture?¹⁰ Is there any evidence that an event like that can be “partially fulfilled,” or is that, in the biblical vocabulary, simply non-fulfillment.¹¹

For a process, such as salvation, which, in the categories of systematic theology involves justification, sanctification, and glorification, it might be more suitable to talk about partial fulfillment. In any case, this is a far different type of example from the rapture because it is envisaged a process already. But too often, distinctions like this – between process and event – are ignored altogether, so that for instance, our ongoing sanctification is employed as an example of the already/not yet schema, contributing to the idea of partial fulfillment as an appropriate category for prophecy and its outworking.

And what of definitions like this one of Charles Dyer? He states: “Biblical fulfillment occurs when the meaning of a specific Old Testament prophecy finds its exact correspondence in a New Testament person, activity, or event.”¹⁷ If the New Testament writer looks back to the Old Testament and draws significance from the Old Testament for his specific audience, this is application of the Old Testament, not fulfillment of the Old Testament.”¹² Is this a definition that would satisfy most people or even apply to the concept of partial fulfillment?

Therefore, just as we need to clearly identify the meaning of NC and what is included, we must also clarify how the terms “fulfillment” and “partial fulfillment” are being used, not only in the Bible but also by any author using the term. It seems to me that interpreters have lacked clarity in both of these areas. To reiterate: Is the meaning of the term “partial fulfillment” the same when the prophecies in one case may be speaking about a process and in another case may be speaking about an event? Our salvation is a process; our rapture is an event. There may be a “partial fulfillment” of being saved (justification, sanctification, glorification), but is there “partial fulfillment” of the rapture? Is such an idea either logically or exegetically justified?

¹⁰ I will argue NC is an event, complete spiritual transformation.

¹¹ One thinks, for instance of the rebuilding of the walls and temple in Ezra-Nehemiah. While this is a fulfillment of the prophecy regarding the return after 70 years, there are many indications that, far from being a “partial fulfillment” of the future rebuilt city, the work of Ezra-Nehemiah is considered non-fulfillment of these eschatological passages.

¹² Charles Dyer, “Biblical Meaning of ‘Fulfillment,’” *Issues in Dispensationalism*, Wesley R. Willis, John R. Master and Charles Caldwell Ryrie, ed. (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1994), p. 67.

Issue #3

A third significant area is the exegetical meaning of Jeremiah 31:31-34 in the Jeremiah context. This is critical if we are to understand what is promised and how this passage might relate to the Church's own experience. Key to the answer is whether, in its context, the subject of the Jeremiah text, the forgiveness of sins, is what we might call justification (initial salvation) or sanctification/glorification.

There are minor textual variations between the MT and the LXX texts, but these do not appear to be change the meaning of the text in ways that would affect the issue in question. The expression "though I was their husband" (וְאֲנִי בְעֵלְהֵם בָּמָּה) is translated by ἐγὼ ἠμέλησα αὐτῶν in the LXX ("I disregarded them"). Hebrews 8:9 also reads κἀγὼ ἠμέλησα αὐτῶν, not surprising since Hebrews always quotes the LXX rather than the MT if there are differences. While the MT would certainly strengthen the idea of the Lord's covenant relationship with Israel (even disobedient Israel), this same idea is already established by the immediately preceding material. It appears this variation is not determinative in our understanding of the text and in particular the meaning of "forgiveness of sins" which will be examined next.

The NRSV translates this portion of the text: "...for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." The LXX reads: "ἴλεως ἔσομαι ταῖς ἀδικίαις αὐτῶν καὶ τῶν ἀμαρτιῶν αὐτῶν οὐ μὴ μνησθῶ ἔτι" and could be translated "I will be merciful to their unrighteousness and their sins I will surely remember no more" (my translation). The MT reads: "כִּי אֶסְלַח לְעֲוֹנוֹתָם וְלִחַטָּאתָם לֹא אֶזְכֹּר-עוֹד." The MT indicates God will "forgive" (אֶסְלַח) their iniquity (לְעֲוֹנוֹתָם) and their sin (וְלִחַטָּאתָם). These terms in both the Hebrew and Greek texts in Jeremiah are always used in relationship to personal sin which results in God's judgment. Both Jeremiah 30:14 and Jeremiah 36:3 use the same two words (MT and LXX respectively) and illustrate this idea of personal sin against God. In Jeremiah 51:6 the terms חַטָּאתָם and ἀδικία are used to describe the personal sins of the Babylonians for which they will be judged. In other words 31:34 most likely, based on the use of the terms in Jeremiah, is not talking about "forgiveness of sin" in the sense of regeneration (initial salvation).

The idea of "not remembering" may be related to texts like Ezekiel 18:22, 24; 33:16. "'All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live.'" (Eze 18:22 NAS). "But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die." (Eze 18: 24 NAS) "None of his sins that he has committed will be remembered against him. He has practiced justice and righteousness; he shall surely live" (Eze. 33:16 NAS).

So Jeremiah 31:31-32 details what the Lord promises to do. "'Behold, days are coming,' declares the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the

house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,' declares the LORD. 'But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' declares the LORD, 'I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.'"

God will make a new covenant that will be different from the covenant made through Moses at Sinai. The context is explicit that this new covenant replaces an earlier covenant made with the descendants of Jacob as a people who had been redeemed from Egypt. This NC modifies the Mosaic covenant not in terms of the stipulations (Torah) but in the sense that the instructions would be obeyed. The fathers broke the covenant in terms of disobedience, but the Lord promises to transform His people to obedience. The Torah was given to a redeemed people.

As Gleason argues:

Despite their unbelief and rebellion at Kadesh-barnea, the Exodus generation was a redeemed people who had exercised faith. The evidence for this begins when Moses and Aaron first reported the words of the Lord to the people. Hearing Aaron's report and seeing them perform signs, "the people believed" and "bowed low and worshiped" (Exod. 4:30–31; cf. Ps. 106:12). The significance of this initial act of faith by the people should not be overlooked for several reasons. **First**, the word אָמַן, translated "believed," means in the Hiphil form "to have faith, to trust (in)" and was used in the Old Testament to express full confidence and genuine faith in Yahweh. **Second**, the six occurrences of אָמַן in Exodus 4, beginning with Moses' doubts whether the people would "believe" him (vv. 1–9) and ending with their belief in Yahweh (v. 31), mark the people's faith as central to the argument of the chapter. **Third**, the genuineness of the people's faith is evidenced not only by their immediate worship (v. 31; 12:27) but also by their obedience. In response to the specific commands regarding the preparation of the Passover sacrifice, the author emphatically declared twice that all of Israel "did just as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron" (12:28, 50). **Fourth**, in response to their fear of attack by the Egyptians, the Lord promised them "salvation" (14:13). Here the word יְשׁוּעָה is used for only the second time in the Old Testament to predict their deliverance. Following their rescue the author declared that the Lord indeed "saved [יְיָשַׁע] Israel that day" (v. 30).

Fifth, in response to their deliverance, the text again states, "they believed in [אָמַן plus בָּ] the Lord" (vv. 30–31). The Hiphil form of אָמַן, this time with the preposition בָּ, denotes their entrance into a relationship of trust in Yahweh. This form is also used of Abraham, in Genesis 15:6, who "believed in the Lord, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). The genuineness of their faith and praise is noted elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., Ps. 106:12). **Sixth**, the Song of Moses describes the rescue from Egypt as "salvation" (יְשׁוּעָה, Exod. 15:2) by which the Israelites were "redeemed" (v. 13) and "purchased" (v. 16). **Seventh**, references to their deliverance elsewhere in the Old Testament show that, though they sinned (Ps. 106:6), forgot God's works and kindness (v. 7), and rebelled (v. 7), the Lord

“redeemed” (78:42; 106:10; Isa. 63:9), “saved” (106:8, 10; Isa. 63:8–9), and forgave them (Neh. 9:17; Pss. 78:38; 99:8). **Eighth**, the establishment of the Sinai Covenant (Exod. 24:1–9) with the people of Israel is another indication of their redeemed status. The giving of the Law was never intended to provide a means of salvation; instead it presupposed faith and was given to an already redeemed people.¹³

God promises to put His law (אֶת־תּוֹרָתִי) within them and on their heart. It is not that the Mosaic stipulations are going to be changed but rather the reality of the people keeping Moses’ instruction. In other words there will be divine empowerment of the people, “making” them obey the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic covenant told God’s people (Israel) what to do and that does not change. This NC is the promise of divine transformation to bring about obedience. It is the antidote for disobedience.¹⁴

“Kimchi asserts that ‘not like the covenant’ does not mean ‘not the covenant’, but rather ‘the Sinai covenant fundamentally changed’ and this is a fine distinction to which many scholars have attached value. The metamorphosis consists in the circumstance that the new covenant will not be broken and also in its inwardness, written on the heart not on tablets of stone (Sinai) or in a book (Deuteronomy).”¹⁵

¹³ “The Old Testament Background of Rest in Hebrews 3:7-4:11,” Randall C. Gleason, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 157, (July-September 2000): pp. 288-89.

¹⁴ This stands in contrast with the extra biblical usages of the NC terminology. ““From the aforementioned OT passages the main expression that surfaces in intertestamental Judaism is “new covenant” (see Jer. 31:31), which occurs in the *Damascus Document* (CD). Fragments of this document were found in Qumran, but the relevant sections are known from medieval copies of this document found in 1896-1897 in the *genizah* (manuscript storeroom) of the old Cairo synagogue. Following the most widely accepted theory, we may say that according to the document, the Qumran community saw itself as people of the “new covenant” just before the time of Jesus (Vermes [1987:81], who calls this document *The Damascus Rule*, dates it ca. 100BC). In CD-A VI, 17b-19 we read, “to separate unclean from clean...to keep the Sabbath day according to the exact interpretation, and the festivals and the day of fasting, according to what they had discovered, those who entered the new covenant in the land of Damascus”(García Martínez 1994: 37). In CD-A VIII, 21 the text breaks off when, after the blank space, we read the words “All of the men who entered the new covenant in the land of Damascus...” From another passage we learn that some members of the community were unfaithful to the precepts of God. About these people the document says: “Thus, all the men who entered the new covenant in the land of Damascus and turned and betrayed and departed from the well of living waters shall not be counted in the assembly of the people and shall not be inscribed in their lists ... ” (CD-B XIX, 33b-35).

It may have special significance that the term “new covenant” appears only in the *Damascus Document*. Other documents from Qumran use the term “covenant” without the adjective “new.” Perhaps the community became reluctant to emphasize the element of newness because in antiquity the older generally was considered to be better (see the monograph by Pilhofer [1990] on this theme). However, even these very few references to the “new covenant” (an expression that they could find in Jeremiah) could be looked at as pointers to how they understood themselves, and thus it may be in the background of their thoughts also on occasions when they simply emphasize that they are in a covenantal relationship with God.”¹⁴ Beale and Carson, [Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament](#), p. 757. It seems to me hard to identify this new covenant entered into in Damascus with Jeremiah because of two major reasons: This covenant was made by man and not God, and this covenant could be and was broken contrary to Jeremiah 31.

¹⁵ William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1986). 818.

The replacement covenant will, like the Mosaic covenant, be given to a redeemed people. The NC specifically replaces the Mosaic covenant by promising to supply the divine transformation necessary for obedience and thus the fulfillment of the promises of God. The righteousness of God is manifested in that He does not lower His standard of perfect obedience for the kingdom blessings because He makes His chosen people obey perfectly.

“If God’s Law is written in the heart (this is the usual exegesis), there can be no conflict between desire and will (God’s will), pleasure and will or affection and will, since love of God with all the heart and soul (Deut 30:6) will issue from this transformation at the core of being. It will amount to an inerrant moral sense (cf. Peake), a ‘knowledge of Yahweh’ which every member of his community will possess.”¹⁶ This appears to be something different from what is usually thought of as being involved with “regeneration.”

The following quote makes the point:

“The exegesis of vv. 31–34 by those who hold that Jeremiah is the author enlarges on the prodigious claims which they suppose are being made by these verses (Giesebrecht, Cornill, Peake, H. Schmidt, Volz, Rudolph, Weiser; Bright, 1966, pp. 188–210). The Law of God as an external imposition will be transcended and nothing less than a new creation and a new age will eventuate. Children will enjoy a harmony with the mind and will of God which is inborn and untaught. A peak in the spiritual history of mankind is forecast; the old Adam will be slain and men will be incapable of other than good. These are theological flights into dizzy heights which leave the realities of our world stranded far below.”¹⁷

Further, as Davidson develops:

“It is Jeremiah’s bitter experience that no attempt at reformation, however sincere, could remedy this situation. All broke down on the sheer cussedness of human nature. Between what God demanded and what the people could give, there was an unbridgeable gulf. Jeremiah knew that this fact had to be faced or all talk about a new future would end up under the shadow of the same disobedience which had ruined the past. The new covenant passage claims that the unbridgeable can be bridged, but only from God’s side.

This new covenant, which lies for Jeremiah in the unspecified future, is here compared and contrasted with the covenant at Mt Sinai, a covenant which was the Lord’s gift to the people after he had delivered them from captivity in Egypt. In what sense is it new? It is new

(1) because instead of God’s law or teaching (Hebrew, *torah*) facing the people as a demand written on tablets of stone (see Exod. 31:18; 34:28–29) or in any other kind of document, that teaching will be written within their hearts. In other words, instead of

¹⁶William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1986). 820.

¹⁷William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1986). 821.

obedience being a question of response to external commandments, obedience is to become second nature to the people. Inner response will replace outward demand.

(2) because there will no longer be any need for instruction in what God requires. Every Tom, Dick and Harry will know what God requires, without any prompting.

(3) because this new relationship will be one where the tragic legacy of repeated past failure will be dealt with. Through forgiveness the past will become a closed book.

In other respects this new covenant is simply a re-run of the Sinai covenant: like it, it is based on God's initiative; like it, its object is that there should be in the world a "people of God" (verse 33). It is quite wrong to think that this new covenant is the point in the Old Testament where the focus of religion switches from the community to the individual. It does not. It is about a new kind of community. It is Jeremiah's way of throwing into the future for their solution all the problems and all the continuing wrong which he saw in the relationship between his people and God. Fundamental to everything, he says, is his conviction that the solution can only come from God. Once we move beyond that central conviction, there are certain things in this passage that ought to raise questions in our minds. No Christian, for example, not even one who protests most loudly that he belongs to 'the new covenant,' ever claims that there is no longer any need for instruction in the faith by way of continuing teaching. Indeed such Christians are usually the most insistent on the need for sound teaching. Yet this passage seems to claim that under the new covenant such teaching will be unnecessary (verse 34). And there is a deeper problem. We can see why the New Testament—and 'Testament'" is simply the Latin word for 'covenant'—claims that this hope of Jeremiah's has been fulfilled in Jesus. In him we see the unbridgeable bridged. In him we see a human life, which in all its glory and true humanity, gives that obedience which Israel was never able to give. But if we look at Christians, at the new people of God, at the Church, what are we to say? If Jeremiah were in our midst today might he not still be looking forward to a new covenant, for precisely the same reasons that led him to talk about the need for one in his own day? Is there any evidence that we in the Church today are any more obedient to God than Jeremiah was, or the people in his own day were? Perhaps instead of talking glibly as Christians, as we sometimes do, about the new covenant, we ought to take a long hard look at ourselves...and wonder."¹⁸

The NET Bible notes share this same perspective. "The prior history of the nations of Israel and Judah and Judah's current practice had been one of persistent violation of this agreement despite repeated warnings of the prophets that God would punish them for that (see especially Jer 7, 11). Because of that, Israel had been exiled (cf., e.g., Jer 3:8), and now Judah was threatened with the same (cf., e.g., Jer 7:15). Jer 30–31 look forward to a time when both Israel and Judah will be regathered, reunited, and under a new agreement which includes the same stipulations but with a different relationship (v. 32)."¹⁹

¹⁸Robert Davidson, M.A., *Jeremiah and Lamentations : Volume 2*, The Daily study Bible series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001, c1983). 88-89.

¹⁹Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible Notes* (Biblical Studies Press, 2003; 2003). Je 31:32.

Just as the Mosaic Law was not designed to simply “get people saved” in the initial sense as the idea of “saved” is often used, so also to suggest that “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” refers simply of initial salvation is inappropriate. The New Testament is replete with illustrations that God does remember our sins and does hold us accountable. How then is this being “fulfilled” now? Does not the New Testament use the wilderness imagery for the church? In what sense are we more godly than many of the Old Testament saints who are used as examples for us to emulate? “The heart and mind inscribed with the revelation of God cannot turn to sin again (Rudolph, 185; Brueggemann, 71). Therefore, faithfulness to the new covenant will be a gift of divine mercy, not a human achievement.”²⁰

Now, how does this discussion relate to New Covenant understanding in dispensational thought? One familiar—but by no means the only—example of the necessity of applying careful definitions and exegesis can be found explanation of NC by the editors of the 1967 Scofield Bible.

The notes on the NC in the 1917 edition of the Scofield Bible found in Hebrew 8 contrast the Mosaic Covenant with the New Covenant, citing some NT references but not addressing the issue of fulfillment as such.²¹ The 1967 edition, however, moved the NC notes from Hebrews 8 to Jeremiah 31 and attempted to develop the matter: “[31:31] The New Covenant of 31:31-40 and 32:40ff. is one of the significant covenants of Scripture, and is remarkably full, stating, (1) the time of the covenant (v:31, 33); ; (2) the parties of the covenant (v. 31); (3) the contrast in covenant—Mosaic and New (v.32); (4) the terms of the covenant (v. 33); (5) the comprehensiveness of the covenant (v. 34); (6) the basic features of the covenant (v. 34): (a) knowledge of God and (b) forgiveness of sin; (7) the perpetuity of the people of the covenant (vv. 35-37); and (8) the guarantee of the covenant (the rebuilt city) (vv. 38-40). See Heb 8:8, *note*. Although certain features of this covenant have been fulfilled for believers in the present Church Age, e.g. (6) above, the covenant remains to be realized for Israel according to the explicit statement of v. 31.”

²⁰ “The heart and mind inscribed with the revelation of God cannot turn to sin again (Rudolph, 185; Brueggemann, 71). Therefore, faithfulness to the new covenant will be a gift of divine mercy, not a human achievement.” Gerald L. Keown, *Word Biblical Commentary : Jeremiah 26-52*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002). 135.

²¹ The notes on the NC in the 1917 edition of the Scofield Bible found in Hebrews 8 are as follows:

“The New Covenant, Summary:

- (1) “Better” than the Mosaic covenant not morally, but efficaciously [Hebrews 7:19](#); [Romans 8:3,4](#).
- (2) Established on “better” (i.e. unconditional) promises. In the Mosaic Covenant God said, “If ye will” [Exodus 19:5](#), in the New Covenant He says, “I will” [Hebrews 8:10,12](#).
- (3) Under the Mosaic Covenant obedience sprang from fear [Hebrews 2:2](#); [12:25-27](#) under the New from a willing heart and mind [Hebrews 8:10](#).
- (4) The New Covenant secures the personal revelation of the Lord to every believer [Hebrews 8:11](#).
- (5) the complete oblivion of sins [Hebrews 8:12](#); [10:17](#); [10:3](#).
- (6) rests upon an accomplished redemption [Matthew 26:27,28](#); [1 Corinthians 11:25](#); [Hebrews 9:11,12,18- 23](#).
- (7) and secures the perpetuity, future conversion, and blessing of Israel. [Jeremiah 31:31-40](#). See also “Kingdom (O.T.),” and [2 Samuel 7:8-17](#).”

Although there may be no clear consensus among classic dispensationalists on the New Covenant, the following quote probably summarizes fairly the “present dispensational” interpretation, broadly speaking: “When the OT is examined to discover what this New Covenant²² involved, and when the NT is investigated for further clarification, it becomes clear that only one new covenant is in view, even though different groups may derive somewhat varying benefits from it. The essence of the new covenant is spiritual regeneration, enjoyed now by Christian believers and prophesied for national Israel at the second coming of Christ.^{51”23}

However, whatever its merits, I would suggest that this statement fails precisely along the lines of the three issues I have attempted to raise in this paper. First, it is unclear at best exactly what Old Testament NC passages may be in view. It seems unlikely that it is limited to the one passage that uses the term “new covenant,” namely, Jeremiah 31

Second, it does not address one of the fundamental questions--the meaning of *fulfillment*. Based on point #6 of the Scofield note, the fulfillment in question must be “partial” or “limited” since dispensationalists in general would hold to a future fulfillment for Israel. Is the expression analogous to Isaiah 61:1-2 in that part of the text is related to (“fulfilled”) at the first advent and part is related to (“fulfilled”) at the second? Are there two “fulfillments” of the text, one for the Church and another for Israel? Actually, the more generally accepted view relates the present fulfillment (“forgiveness of sins”) to regeneration (“getting saved”), as does the 1967 note. This text is thus commonly seen as “fulfilled” by believers in the Church Age when they come to know Christ.²⁴

Yet this understanding leads directly to the third issue raised in this paper. Besides some problems with a consistent definition of *fulfillment* that open the door to other partial fulfillment understandings, it faces a far more critical challenge in seeming to be at odds with the very context of the original text, given to a redeemed people and promising their sanctification as a national entity. **The context of the text relates to corporate Israel and not**

²² It should be observed the OT text in Jeremiah does not refer to “the NC” (בְּרִית הַדְּשָׁה). The Hebrew lacks the definite article. So also does the LXX (διὰθήκην καινὴν). The article would point to definiteness. Jeremiah is not so much identifying as describing something. There will be a new covenant different from the Mosaic covenant. The text does not specifically “name” this covenant but notes its differences (it is new) from the Mosaic covenant. It is not given a “name” but merely described as being a “new” covenant that will replace the Mosaic covenant in terms of divine enablement (the stipulations or “Torah” remain the same). Is that “unnamed” different (new) covenant what is being “fulfilled” today? To use the expression “the NC” may not be accurate by implying something possibly alien to the text.

⁵¹ 51. Kent, “The New Covenant and the Church,” 289.

²³ Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 152* (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995; 2002). 152:442.

²⁴ I recognize there are some who may argue on the basis of 1 John that because of the Holy Spirit’s teaching ministry “they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother...” is an aspect of the New Covenant now being “fulfilled.” Of course this perspective raises the question of why the NT speaks of the gift of teaching and the perspective of growing in grace and knowledge. It also may beg the question of the meaning of this text in its context.

simply to individuals per se. It is dealing with national transformation not simply individual regeneration.

Conclusion

Based on this brief analysis I am suggesting Dispensationalism, as illustrated by but not limited to the NC note in the 1967 edition of the Scofield Bible, may have gone wrong in several ways. Its introduction of the idea of “fulfillment” may have proved unhelpful in that it did not specify what this entailed. The only part of the NC covenant said to be “fulfilled” actually refers, in its context, to the results of God’s complete transforming grace which includes not simply regeneration but the divine transformation of the people of God so they do not sin. This complete transforming grace is not yet a reality for the child of God living on earth.²⁵ The text is not promising spiritual regeneration (in an initial sense) but total divine transformation that results in complete obedience on earth to the Mosaic Law and all that it demands.²⁶ It is important that any understanding of NC address this meaning of the Jeremiah passage.

The promises of Jeremiah were for Israel’s transformation so they could enter into the land promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob which demanded perfect obedience to the commands of God. In His grace God has promised to change their hearts so that they will be obedient and will enter into these promises. In my view the church is not presently “fulfilling” in any way any part of Jeremiah 31:31-34; its fulfillment awaits the future kingdom and its blessings for Israel.

Appendix

Of course, I am keenly aware that dispensational interpreters would not stretch to interpret a promise of sanctification for national Israel as being fulfilled in the regeneration of Church believers were it not for the references to “new covenant” found in the New Testament. (Remember that the 1917 Scofield note was attached to Hebrew 8, not to Jeremiah31.)

It is not within the assigned scope of this paper to propose resolutions to the questions raised by such New Testament passages, and I do not want to promote digression from focus on the Old Testament text itself. I would, however, like to make a few general observations:

²⁵ If this understanding of the NC in Jeremiah is correct, one could agree but simply add the New Testament gives an additional (not contradictory) meaning to the Jeremiah text. If this be the case, and nothing in Jeremiah 31:31-34 as explicitly stated is presently being fulfilled, why does the New Testament quote the Old Testament text and not add this new/additional idea? How does one know “regeneration fulfillment” is added to the original Old Testament meaning? If one were to argue we are “partially fulfilling” this through the ministry of the Spirit how do the Corinthian believers, the church in Ephesus (Revelation 2:4-5), and believers in the church today demonstrate this? If “partial transformation” is “partial fulfillment” of the prophecy then the prophecy was being “partially fulfilled” in the Old Testament and would hardly have been “new.”

²⁶ The Church is no longer guided directly by the Mosaic Law.

- 1) The New Testament passages themselves are addressed to believers, in contexts related to sanctification rather than primarily to regeneration.
- 2) We must guard against being influenced in our reading of the NT either by replacement theology or by the Greek material/immaterial distinction (as opposed to the Bible's visible/invisible understanding).
- 3) Other approaches may allow us to interpret Jeremiah 31 according to its plain meaning for its delineated audience and still give contextual meaning to the NT passages in question. For instance:
 - a. The Lord's Supper does suggest the reality of the New Covenant being related to the death of Christ. Just because a covenant is made, however, does not mean it is immediately operative (cf. Genesis 3:15; 15).
 - b. The author of Hebrews writes from the perspective of a present reality of the Mosaic Law and Levitical priesthood and only states that the revelation of the NC prophesied something better that would bring about spiritual perfection.
- 4) Nowhere does the New Testament say NC is being fulfilled/actualized today.