

THE NEW COVENANT Is it Ratified or Inaugurated?

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Often what is addressed to Israel is open to direct application to the church; at other times, it is not. Paul used the illustration of Israel's wilderness experiences, which he then applied directly to the Corinthian believers (1 Cor. 10:1-13). Although Israel's wilderness experiences are unique, their responses to temptations are applied directly to all believers. He explains, "all these things happened *to* Israel as examples (*tupos*), they were written *for* our admonition" (10:11). The responses of both the Israelites and the believers were types of "lust after evil things." (10:6).

Only dispensational theology makes a distinction between Israel and the church, and that introduces a caution against indiscriminately making these applications. We are cautious to ask, why does this apply and why does that not apply? Consider an illustration: Which letter would you share with a roommate? Would you share a love letter you received from your fiancé? On the other hand, would you share a letter advertising computers with a roommate? Some letters are more personal than others are. In some instances, you identify with your roommate in what is being written; if he needs a computer as you do, then you may choose to share it with him.

Letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor in the *Revelation of Jesus Christ* are very historically particular in the circumstances to which they refer. Yet we recognize the same *type* of experiences in our church today to which the messages may apply.

Likewise, regarding the Epistolary literature in the New Testament, the letters were collected in the canon as the early church recognized the same *type* of issues occurring again in the second century's church of the body of Christ. The *pastoral epistles* are so-called because Timothy and Titus were addressed concerning issues related to a pastoral role. General epistles are not historically particular, but share a common *type* of problems of the Christian faith. Paul often encouraged that his letters addressed to specific historical churches be read by other churches (1Thes. 5:27, Col.4:16) because brothers in Christ face many of the same *type* of issues.

Old Testament Revelation is about God and His Dealings with Israel

The books of the Old Testament were addressed to Israel, to whom "the oracles of God" had been committed (Rom.3:2). The early church received the oracles as Scripture; they are inspired by God and are profitable (1Tim.3:16). The dispensational approach to the Bible sees the believers as STEWARDS of the Revelation they have received. In addition, dispensationalists recognize a difference between Israel's stewardship (dispensation of the law) and the church's stewardship (dispensation of grace). The

believer can also learn from the stewardship of Israel. In that sense, the Old Testament was written *to* Israel, but it is *for* the church's admonition. Admonition involves meanings that communicate more than learning *about* God, but also learning *from* God and applied to their stewardship.

Other revelation, however, is written to Israel for the profit of Israel in particular; this revelation excludes the church. So when Paul describes the Israelites, his relatives, they are the people "to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God and the promises" (Rom.9:4). God's choice of Abraham does not apply to us. The partnership that Israel's covenants address has no application to the church. Israel's glory is not shared by the church. They are the ethnic people "from whom according to the flesh Christ came (Rom.9:5).

The implications that I have drawn may appear to be questioned by Paul's later revelation (Eph. 2:13-22). I would posit a compatibility in the language I used this week that Israel is a *type* of the people of God even as the church is a *type* of the people of God. The breaking down of the partition between Jew and Gentile in the church does not make them identical in every respect. At the very least, it does not change their ethnicity.

The people of God are brought near "by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13). "Christ Himself is our peace" (Eph. 2:14) and the basis of the reconciliation of the whole world (2Cor. 5:18,19). In the church, Christ has made both into one and has broken down the middle wall of separation, so as to create *in Himself* one new man from the two, thus making peace (2:14,15). This new man is Christ's body on earth. The body on earth is necessary since Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father. Believing Gentiles are "fellow citizens with the (Jewish) saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of . . . Jesus Christ" (2:19-22).

This revelation simply removes distinctions in the church that may not remain meaningful in other considerations. It does not mean that the church *replaces* Israel nor that Israel's covenants will not *fashion* them as a future nation on earth.

Old Testament Covenants are about Partnerships between God and Israel that Provide Israel with Hope.

A covenant exists as a formal arrangement between *two* partners, having been ratified by oath/sacrifice.¹ Biblical covenants are *arrangements* rather than *agreements* because God unilaterally reveals the terms. And, these arrangements are with His chosen people (Gen. 15:18). There are two kinds of arrangements: a promissory covenant is *ratified* by the promising party which then exists unconditionally, regardless of the second party's participation. The function in *inauguration* does involve both party's participation. An obligatory covenant (the Law) is *ratified* by both partners (Ex.24:1-8) and thus exists and functions dependent on and conditioned on both partners.

¹ M. Weinfeld, "b^erîth" TDOT 11 eds. Botterweck and Ringgren. 253-279. D. J. McCarthy. *Treaty and Covenant*. AnBibl, 21 Rome, (1963) G. Mendenhall "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition, BA, 17 (1954) 50-76. J. Begrich, "Berit," ZAW, 60 (1944) 1-11.

The *partnership* is formally ratified at a ceremony of some sort. Several terms in the Hebrew Bible are used to refer to the covenant arrangement:

karât – “cutting a covenant” describes ratification by sacrifice, after which it exists.

qûm – Establish the covenant as it begins to function; it is inaugurated.

natan – Given the benefits promised, thus inaugurated.

Although these terms are not technically distinct, they are distinguishable in relation to the arrangements. The Abrahamic covenant was *ratified* in the ceremony in Gen. 15:8-21. It wasn't *given* at the birth of Ishmael (Gen 17:2), but was *given* in the birth of Isaac (Gen 21:1-7). Without question, it was inaugurated when Joshua and his generation claimed the land.

The New Covenant is a Promissory Partnership Between the LORD and Israel Ratified on the Cross

The New Covenant was revealed by Jeremiah (31:31-34). It had been earlier mentioned by Isaiah (42:6; 49:8; “everlasting covenant,” 55:3) and later mentioned by Ezekiel (“covenant of peace,” 34:25; 37:26). The covenant's benefits promised that Israel would be restored as a spiritual people and a unified nation. In Jeremiah, it was contrasted with the Mosaic covenant, the old that would be replaced by the new, national covenant with Israel.

Jeremiah is quoted twice in *Hebrews*, and benefits of the New Covenant are applied to the church age believers. These benefits are considered in the context of the Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ. Believers are called to be benefactors of some of the promised New Covenant blessings quoted from Jeremiah. Christ ratified the covenant as *Mediator* of the New Covenant (8:6; 9:15; 10:9).² A mediator gets the parties together for ratification, on the grounds of “the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant” (9:15). Israel, however, as one of the parties participating in the crucifixion, rejected the Mediator and the redemption provided.

Does that mean that the New Covenant was not ratified? Ratification of a promissory covenant necessitates only the involvement of the Partner who made the promises. The author to the *Hebrews* made it very clear that Christ's sacrifice satisfied God (9:23-28). Believers are called after the ratification on the cross (3:1,14) not as partners of a covenant already ratified, but as beneficiaries of that covenant.

How can believers be beneficiaries of a covenant to which they are not party? While the covenant was *ratified* as a promised New Covenant (9:15; 10:9), it was *inaugurated* as a last will and “testament” (9:16, 17). This unique change in meaning of *diathēkē* from covenant (9:15) to testament (9:16,17) is determined by contextual usage. A testament is not a partnership, but a legal will ratified and inaugurated at the death of

² Any indefinite force in 8:6 due to the absence of the article is replaced by the article in “the new covenant” (9:15) and “the second” (10:9) in contrast to “the first.”

the testator. The beneficiaries are the called ones (9:15b and 3:1). The blessings *included* are the promised spiritual benefits that result in believers being changed into the likeness of the glory of the LORD (2Cor. 3:18). The blessings *excluded* are benefits promised to the collective nation. In *Hebrews* these benefits remain available for “the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (8:8) and “*with them*” (10:16). This is not a covenant as quoted to be inaugurated “*with us.*”

CONCLUSION

The New Covenant has been ratified at the cross of Christ (the cup of the New Covenant, 1Cor. 11:25), but it will be inaugurated in partnership with Israel (Rom. 11:26). Israel will someday recognize the One whom they crucified and mourn (Zech. 12:10-12). Then, in that partnership, Israel will serve the Lord as originally envisioned (Gen. 12:3; Ex. 19:5,6).