

Jeremiah's Prophecy of a New Covenant for the House of Israel

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JEREMIAH, A PROPHET OF Judah before and during the Babylonian exile (586 – 538 BC), delivered a key promise to the house of Israel and the house of Judah, a promise of coming days when God would establish a new covenant:

“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

In this promise of a new covenant, we see the following elements:

Participants in this covenant: [1] God [2] the house of Israel, and the house of Judah. [The houses of Israel and Judah were separated soon after Solomon’s death around 975 BC. The Assyrians captured Israel (the northern kingdom) in 722 BC, and Babylon would defeat Judah and Jerusalem in 586 BC.]

Nature of this covenant: Not according to the covenant made at Mount Sinai, which was broken by the house of Israel.

Features of this covenant: [1] God’s laws in their hearts and minds [2] The house of Israel is God’s people, and He is their God [3] Everyone in the house of Israel will know the Lord, from the least to the greatest [4] God will forgive their sins and remember them no more.

Has Jeremiah’s prophecy come true? Has a new covenant been established with the house of Israel? Some insist that the answer to these questions is “no”:

[1] “This covenant must follow the return of Christ at the second advent... This covenant will be realized in the millennial age... the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34 must and can be fulfilled only by the nation Israel and not by the Church” (Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 1958).

[2] “...the new covenant is with Israel and the fulfillment [will be] in the millennial kingdom after the second coming of Christ... the new covenant as revealed in the Old Testament concerns Israel and requires fulfillment in the millennium kingdom” (John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 1959).

[3] “The Church, then, is not under the new covenant...it is Israel which is God’s covenant people” (Harry Ironside, *Notes on the Prophecy of and Lamentations of Jeremiah*, 1906).

Those who believe this way apparently insist that we identify “*the house of Israel*,” even now, as national Israel. This assumption acts as a powerful filter against the idea that the new covenant has already been established:

- It matters not that Jesus explicitly said His blood was to be poured out in order to give birth to the new covenant, “*made with many for the forgiveness of sins*” (Matthew 26:28), the very purpose for which Jeremiah said it was designed.
- It matters not that Paul said he and his co-workers in the gospel were “*ministers of the new covenant*,” which he likened to “the ministry of the Spirit” and “*the ministry of righteousness*.” Paul’s ministry excelled the “*ministry of death, written and engraved on stones*” and **ready to pass away** (2 Cor 3:5-11).
- It matters not that Paul gave an “*analogy of two covenants*,” one represented by Mount Sinai (the birthplace of the old covenant), a woman in bondage, and earthly Jerusalem, which was **about to be cast out**; and the other covenant representing the “*Jerusalem above*,” which is free and “*the mother of us all*” (Gal 4:21-31).
- It matters not that the author of Hebrews states that Jesus “*has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises*” (Hebrews 8:6).
- It matters not that the author of Hebrews immediately goes on to quote from Jeremiah’s prophecy and explicitly states (Heb 8:6-13) that this New Covenant had been established in his own time (i.e. the first century AD), even as the first covenant had been made obsolete and was **ready to vanish away**.
- It matters not that Hebrews 12:22-24 says that the church had already “*come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem . . . to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.*”

- It matters not that “the New Testament” is named as such due to its unveiling of God’s new covenant.

One of the many cures for this hangup can be found in Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians. Notice the vocabulary that Paul uses in the following passage (Eph 2:11-22):

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that He might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through Him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

There are plenty of gems worth unpacking in this beautiful passage, but I’ve highlighted two sections to examine (verses 12 and 19-21), as well as three phrases which I believe relate to Jeremiah’s prophecy:

“the commonwealth of Israel”

“the household of God”

“a dwelling place for God”

The Commonwealth of Israel

In verse 11 Paul specifically addresses Gentile believers, i.e. non-Jewish followers of Christ. He reminds them (verse 12) that, just as they were previously separated from Christ, they were also previously “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel.” By speaking this way, Paul indicates that now that the Gentile believers are “in Christ” they now also belong to the commonwealth of Israel. This expression, “commonwealth of Israel,” appears to mirror the expression, “the house of Israel,” used in Jeremiah 31 and throughout the Old Testament. The Strong’s Concordance entry for the Greek word translated as “commonwealth” (#4174) is defined as “citizenship; a community.”

Paul also reminds these Gentile believers that they were once “*strangers to the covenants of promise.*” Again, by speaking this way, Paul indicates they are now recipients of “*the covenants of promise*” made to Israel. Paul made a similar point in his epistle to the Galatians, when he declared that all the promises were made to Abraham and his offspring, i.e. Christ alone (Gal 3:16). He then added that those who belong to Christ—regardless of ethnicity, gender, or status (Gal 3:28)—are heirs of those promises (Gal 3:29). We, as followers of Jesus, have received “*the covenants of promise*” because they were made to Jesus, who is true Israel.

The Household of God

In verse 19, Paul refers to the Church as “*the household of God,*” very similar to the way he calls the Church “*the household of faith*” in Galatians 6:10. Again, it seems these titles are parallel to the title, “the house of Israel,” used since the days of Moses. The following is a sample of texts where this title occurs (notice the progression toward unfaithfulness and a state of being lost):

“*And **the house of Israel** called its name Manna. And it was like white coriander seed, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey*” (Exod 16:31).

“*For the cloud of the Lord was above the tabernacle by day, and fire was over it by night, in the sight of all **the house of Israel**, throughout all their journeys*” (Exod 40:38).

“*So the Lord gave to Israel all the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it . . . Not a word failed of any good thing which the Lord had spoken to **the house of Israel**. All came to pass*” (Josh 21:43-45).

“*For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is **the house of Israel**, And the men of Judah are His pleasant plant. He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; For righteousness, but behold, a cry for help*” (Isa 5:7).

“*I have seen a horrible thing in **the house of Israel**: There is the harlotry of Ephraim; Israel is defiled*” (Hosea 6:10).

“*But go rather to the lost sheep of **the house of Israel***” (Matt 10:6).

“*But He answered and said, ‘I was not sent except to the lost sheep of **the house of Israel**’*” (Matt 15:24).

“*Therefore let all **the house of Israel** know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ*” (Acts 2:36).

In Ephesians 2:20-22, Paul goes on to define “*the household of God*” as “*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,*” with Jesus as the cornerstone. Everyone, joined together, “*grows into a holy temple in the Lord.*” This is significant. **Jeremiah prophesied that a new covenant would be made with the house of Israel.** Here we see that the household of God, in Jesus, was built on the foundation of the

apostles and prophets. Recall that Paul said he and his co-workers were “*ministers of the new covenant*” (2 Cor 3:5). Since Paul was a minister of the new covenant, this was also true of Peter, John, James, and the other apostles. **The household of God, with Jesus as the cornerstone, has been built on the foundation of apostles who were ministers of the new covenant. This is nothing less than Jeremiah’s prophecy unveiled as a reality in the first century.**

A Dwelling Place for God

Paul says something else very profound to the believers in Ephesus: “*In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*” Paul’s words very clearly echo a common and central theme in the Old Testament, where God repeatedly stated that He had chosen Israel, Jerusalem, and the temple as His dwelling place. Consider the following sample of texts:

“*You will bring them in and plant them In the mountain of Your inheritance, In the place, O Lord, which You have made **for Your own dwelling**, the sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established*” (Exod 15:17).

“*But you shall seek the place where the Lord your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name **for His dwelling place**; and there you shall go*” (Deut 12:5).

“*In Jerusalem also is His tabernacle, and **His dwelling place** in Zion*” (Psalm 76:2).

“*For the Lord has chosen Zion; He has desired it for **His dwelling place***” (Psalm 132:13).

At the same time, God’s dwelling place was in heaven (e.g., 1 Kings 8:30, 39, 43, 49).

By the time John wrote the book of Revelation in the first century, we see a tragic picture of what had become of His former dwelling place, through John’s description of “*Babylon the great.*” Also known as “*the great city*” (see Rev 14:8 and 17:18) and “*the harlot*” (see Rev 17:1-6), “*Babylon the great*” was first identified in Revelation 11:8 as “*the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.*” This is a clear reference to Jerusalem, the place of Jesus’ crucifixion. As we saw in the section above, Hosea called Israel a harlot in his day as well (Hosea 6:10). John invokes the names of two of Israel’s oldest enemies, Sodom and Egypt, and uses them to describe first century Jerusalem. Now, instead of being God’s dwelling place, a terrible thing had happened. Observe what God said had happened to His former dwelling place:

“*And [the angel] cried mightily with a loud voice, saying, “Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become **a dwelling place of demons**, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird!”* (Rev 18:2; see our study on Revelation 18:1)

Had God lost His earthly dwelling place then? Not at all. He dwells with (and in) those who belong to His Son:

*“Then I, John, saw **the holy city, New Jerusalem**, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, **the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God**” (Rev 21:2-3; see part 1² and part 2³ of our study on Rev 21).*

In her last days before judgment, Jerusalem was given over to demons, but since the time of Christ, God dwells in “*the holy city, New Jerusalem.*” We, the church, are that city: “*You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden*” (Matt 5:14). Is this promise from Revelation 21 awaiting future fulfillment? The author of Hebrews didn’t believe so when he told his first century audience that they had already “*come to Mount Zion **and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem . . . to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling . . .***” (Heb 12:22-24). The apostle Paul also didn’t believe so when he quoted Exodus 29:45, Leviticus 26:11, and Ezekiel 37:27 as a present reality for the Church in his own day:

*“For **you are the temple of the living God.** As God has said: **‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people’**” (2 Cor 6:16).*

Here, and also in Revelation 21, we see one of the features of Jeremiah’s prophecy of a new covenant for the house of Israel: “*I will be their God, and they shall be My people*” (Jer 31:33). Consider also this description of the church by Peter:

*“Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up **a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ**” (1 Peter 2:4-5).*

The conclusion is simple. Jeremiah laid out certain things that would be true of the house of Israel when God made a new covenant with that house. Paul, John, and Peter said these things were true of the church, the bride of Christ, in their day. Therefore, the church is the house of Israel, and God has made His new covenant with us. Let us rejoice in this truth, and not allow anyone to try to steal this birthright from the people of God who are in Christ. ✝

1. <https://adammaarschalk.com/2010/01/18/revelation-18/>
2. <https://adammaarschalk.com/2010/04/19/revelation-chapter-21-part-1-verses-1-4/>
3. <https://adammaarschalk.com/2010/04/27/revelation-chapter-21-part-2-verses-5-27/>