

## **Ethical Implications (or God's Economy) of the New Covenant and New Man**

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### **1. Introduction**

In the study of ethical issues, it is imperative to address the “New Covenant” and “New Man” promised in the Old and New Testaments, since human ethical conducts are governed by the Law of God and, as the Book of Genesis mentions, it was revealed that the Law of God was not observed by the people of God. What then is new about the New Covenant and New Man? Ethically speaking, as set out by Frame (2008), there are three ethical approaches, i.e., normative, situational and existential ones. The Ten Commandments, as the original “covenant” between God and the people of God, are the words of God as the normative approach, or perspective. Humans could not observe this normative requirement, which is precisely “sin”, and hence, the New Covenant was given to sinful humans.

The origin of sin is described in the Book of Genesis, and the solution of sin is promised in the Book of Jeremiah. This paper focuses on the latter, i.e., the promise of the solution of sin through the New Covenant, with a reference to the New Man who has been saved through the New Covenant and leads the new life. The structure of this paper is as follows. Section 2 addresses how the “New Covenant” passage in the Old Testament, i.e., Jeremiah 31:31-34, fit into the rest of the book of Jeremiah. Section 3 discusses how the theme of “New Covenant” was developed, whether there are any significant literary, historical, or theological questions involved, whether there are any major problems in the passage, and whether the passage is using prior revelation in any way. Section 4 deals with what the message of the passage is to the original reading audience, and how the passage is used in a significant way in the New Testament, more specifically, the book of Hebrews.

Section 5 mentions what the ethical implications of the New Covenant and New Man are for today, and concludes this paper.

## 2. Context of the New Covenant passage (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

This section concerns an ethical exposition of the “new covenant”<sup>1</sup> described in Jeremiah 31:31-34:

### Verse 31

“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

### Verse 32

It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord.

### Verse 33

“This is not the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

### Verse 34

No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”<sup>2</sup>

There are a lot of issues to be covered in this passage, for the obvious reason

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<sup>1</sup> The term “new covenant” occurs only here in the Old Testament.

<sup>2</sup>The original Hebrew text is as follows (Owens, 1989).

### Verse 31

הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים, נֹאֵם יְהוָה; וְכָרַתִּי, אֶת בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת בֵּית יְהוּדָה בְּרִית חֲדָשָׁה.

### Verse 32

לֹא כַּבְרִית, אֲשֶׁר כָּרַתִּי אֶת אֲבוֹתָם, בְּיוֹם הַחֲזִיקִי בְיָדָם, לְהוֹצִיאָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: אֲשֶׁר הִקְמָה הַפָּרוּ אֶת בְּרִיתִי, וְאֲנֹכִי בָעַלְתִּי כֶּם נֹאֵם יְהוָה.

### Verse 33

כִּי זֹאת הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר אֲכַרֵּת אֶת בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל אַחֲרֵי הַיָּמִים הֵּם, נֹאֵם יְהוָה, נִתְּתִי אֶת תּוֹרָתִי בְקֶרְפֶּךָ, וְעַל לִבָּם אֲכַתְּבֶנָּה; וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם לֵאלֹהִים, וְהִמָּה יִהְיוּ לִי לְעָם.

### Verse 34

וְלֹא יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד, אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ וְאִישׁ אֶת אָחִיו לֵאמֹר, דַּע, אֶת יְהוָה: כִּי כֻלָּם יִדְעוּ אוֹתִי לְמַשְׁתָּנָם וְעַד גְּדוּלָם, נֹאֵם יְהוָה כִּי אֶסְלַח לְעֻנָּם, וְלִחְטָאתָם לֹא אֶזְכֹּר עוֹד.

that the phrase “new covenant” in Jeremiah (part of the Old Testament) links up the Old Testament (or covenant) and the New Testament (covenant). This paper is partial in scope, and attempts are made to highlight some aspects of the meaning of the “new covenant”.

As is well known, the book of Jeremiah is an anthology of Jeremiah’s sayings which grew from the scroll dictated to Baruch, Jeremiah’s scribe, with some texts added to it at various times (Alexander and Alexander, 1999). As such, it is a mixture of prose and poetry.

The structure of the book of Jeremiah can be summarily presented as follows (according to the course study guide).

- I. The Call of Jeremiah (1)
- II. Prophecies concerning Judah (2-45)
  - A. Prophecies before the fall of Jerusalem (2-39)
    - 1. Prophecies concerning Judah’s destruction (2-20)
    - 2. Prophecies concerning Nebuchadnezzar, God’s instrument to punish Jerusalem (21-29)
    - 3. Prophecies of the future restoration of Judah (30-33)
    - 4. Prophecies against Zedekiah and Jehoiakim (34-36)
    - 5. Prophecies during the siege and destruction of Jerusalem (37-39)
  - B. Prophecies after the Fall of Jerusalem (40-45)
    - 1. Prophecies under Gedeliah (40-43:7)
    - 2. Prophecies in Egypt (43:8-44:30)
    - 3. Prophecy to Baruch (45)
- III. Prophecies against the foreign nations (46-51)
- IV. An Historical Appendix (52)

The focal passage in this paper (31:31-34) is included in the part “Prophecies of the future restoration of Judah (30-33)” in the above outline. As is widely known, the book of Jeremiah was not structure in the chronological order. The part 30-33 is often referred to as “the little book of consolation” because of its comforting tone in the midst of oracles of judgments.

The prophetic works including the book of Jeremiah are based on God’s

dealings with the Hebrew nation on the basis of the covenant given to Moses at Mt.Sinai. For both Israel and Judah after the division of the united Kingdom in 931 B.C., the Mosaic covenant became lost or blurred (Dillard and Longman, 1994). The power of Assyria was already declining, and Babylon emerged to become the instrument of God's judgment on his own people in Judah. In 598/7 Babylon defeated Judah and King Nebuchadnezzar put Zedekiah on the throne in Jerusalem. Despite Jeremiah's advice, Zedekiah rebelled against Babylon and precipitated the most serious defeat. In 587, Nebuchadnezzar's army broke into Jerusalem, destroying the city and God's temple, and took the people captive into exile. Jeremiah was an eyewitness of these tumultuous events, and the book of Jeremiah was written against this background.

The "new covenant" is announced for future days in 31:31-34, with the former part (31-34) as oracle I declaring what the new covenant will not be and the latter part what it will be (Lundbom, 2004). The covenant oracles are widely attributed to Jeremiah himself and he is portrayed as "the prophet like Moses": Jeremiah 1:7 depicts Jeremiah as a hesitant person, much like Moses. It is natural that after Moses, Jeremiah was seen to be the giver of a new covenant.

The passage 31:31-34 is a definite prediction that the Mosaic covenant would be superseded by another new covenant. Then the question arises: how new the covenant in the passage is? This has been a contentious issue, with various possibilities (Kaiser, 1972; and many others). Judging from the tense and form of בָּאִים (*baim*), 'are coming' which is Qal accusative participle masculine plural (Owens, 1989), the new covenant seems to be announced for future days. The relationship between God and his people will be renewed after the collapse of the Mosaic

covenant and Israel's loss of nationhood in 586 B.C. This new relationship is anticipated in other terms by Jeremiah (24:7 "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the Lord. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart"; 32:38-40 "They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me."; and 50:5 "They will ask the way to Zion and turn their faces toward it. They will come and bind themselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant that will not be forgotten.")<sup>3</sup> The new covenant forms the centerpiece of a larger hope including a new act of salvation, a new Zion, and a new Davidic King.

The new covenant might be seen as the renewal of the Mosaic covenant (and nothing more), while another interpretation would be to think that Jeremiah announces the end of the Mosaic covenant and presents a covenant that is substantively new. In either case, for Jeremiah, the 'gap' between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant great. Although the new covenant is seen to be in continuity with the Mosaic covenant, it is nevertheless a genuinely new covenant which marks a new beginning in the divine-human relationship since (1) it is given without conditions of conduct; (2) it will be written in the hearts of people, a really new way; and (3) it will be grounded in a wholly new act of divine grace, i.e., the forgiveness of sins (verse 34 "...I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more").

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<sup>33</sup> The new relationship is also anticipated by Ezekiel (16:60; 34:25; 36:27-28; 37:26) Isaiah (42:6; 49:8; 54:10; 55:1-5; 59:21; 61:8) and Malachi (3:1).

### **3. The covenant for the house of Israel, the house of Judah and Christians**

“The house of Israel and the house of Judah” (אֶת בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת בֵּית יְהוּדָה) are obviously taken to refer to both the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom. While some manuscript omits “and the house of Judah”, the preceding section 30:3-4, is intended clearly for both Israel and Judah.<sup>4</sup> An “expanded Israel” including gentiles is a Christian perspective. How can this be so? There is a "multiple-mountain metaphor" of Old Testament prophecies: when you see several mountains (or a mountain range) from a special angle, all the mountains converge to one, but sometimes, you see mountains behind the front one; Old Testament prophecies are much like this, describing multiple situations but sometimes with a focus on the future. Supposing this metaphor is relevant, the question would be "how far the authors of prophetic books were seeing, and how much they were aware of their own prophecies". Jeremiah as the human author might not have seen from the Christian perspective, yet the divine author were surely aware of the full meaning of the prophecies made.

The motivation of God in his mind would always be grace-related when he sends his prophets (including Jeremiah) for proclaiming the words of judgment and restoration. The motivation of Jeremiah 31:31 (“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.”) relates to the latter restoration motif on the part of God. The covenant that God made with the house of Israel is described in a manner similar to that made by a conquering king (Carrol, 1986; and Brown, 2010).

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<sup>4</sup> ‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will bring my people Israel and Judah back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave their forefathers to possess,’ says the Lord (verse 3). These are the words the Lord spoke concerning Israel and Judah...(verse 4).

The verb used here and translated “make” is כָּרַתִּי (*karati*, “cut”) in the original Hebrew and it has the connotation of “unilaterally placing”, rather than “making” between two parties by both parties’ intentions.<sup>5</sup> God’s grace-related unilateral action is in view here. In this sense, the covenant was from God for the house of Israel, the house of Judah, not exactly between them and God since that sounds like both parties have the right of some kind to make the covenant or not autonomously.

And the covenant was not like the covenant that God cut with their fathers, i.e., the Israelites of the Exodus generation (verse 32): they broke the covenant from God unilaterally. In cutting the new covenant, God will put his law in their minds and write it on their hearts (in Verse 33), which is the high-water mark of the Old Testament (Halley, 1962). The law here surely refers to the Mosaic covenant. Yet since the human heart is evil, stubborn and rebellious (Jeremiah 5:23), sin is engraved on the tablet of the heart (17:1). It was on that sin-engraved tablet of the heart that God had inscribed his law in the new covenant, so that “no longer will a man teach his neighbor” (Verse 34).

Should these verses be interpreted in wholly eschatological terms? As stated by Brown (2010), certainly not, since to do so would completely remove these promises from their context without exegetical justification. While the new covenant has been interpreted by Christians as a prophecy of the New Covenant by Jesus (indeed, New Testament means new covenant), it refers to the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian exile and the reconstruction of the Temple. This, however, does not mean that the passage is not eschatological. Brown (2010) points out that the

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<sup>5</sup> Keown, Scalise and Smothers (1995) and McKane (1996) point out that: the Lord alone decides and makes known whether the covenant has been broken; and The Lord alone decides whether to forgive.

promise given by God to the house of Israel through Jeremiah included: (1) the physical return of the exiles to the land; (2) their blessed resettlement there; and in addition, (3) their spiritual renewal and restoration; as well as (4) the glorious reign of the messianic king. Each of these aspects has a historic and partial<sup>6</sup> fulfillment beginning in the 530 B.C., when the first wave of exiles returned to their own land (Jerusalem). Yet at the same time, these aspects on the whole have a future and ultimate fulfillment that awaits the end of the age, i.e., an eschatological viewpoint.

The next section addresses the issue of the linkage between the Old Testament and the New Testament. (It is a huge issue, and only a partial treatment of this issue will be made.)

#### **4. New covenant linking the Old Testament and the New Testament**

This section discusses the linkage between the old (Mosaic) covenant and the new covenant (as in Jeremiah 31) in the context discussed in the previous section. What the message of the passage is to the original reading audience, and how the passage is used in a significant way in the book of Hebrews is the main issue. In the study of the Book of Jeremiah, interests arise concerning the comparison between the Christian and/or Jewish ways of attaining righteousness before God: Christians need Jesus as a mediator, whereas Jewish people seem to try to attain salvation through being righteous (i.e., observing the Mosaic Law) without a mediator. And there seems to be no mention of a mediator in Jeremiah 31:31-34, yet Christians do need Jesus to really “put God's law in our hearts”.

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<sup>6</sup> Brown (2010) mentions that for the relatively meager nature of the return to Jerusalem, especially in numerical terms, the population of Jerusalem during the Persian period was only 12 percent of what it was before the destruction in 586 B.C., thus no more than three thousand people.



How the “new covenant” (in Jeremiah 31:31) was interpreted by the Jewish people in Jeremiah's day is an important matter of investigation. While it would be difficult to pin down what people in Jeremiah's day thought about this because of lack of access to their thoughts. What the Old Testament states is that God would circumcise the hearts of the people (Deuteronomy 30: 6). This is to be done through a mediator (Jesus) as revealed in the New Testament .

After discussing the “new covenant” passage in the book of Jeremiah, discussion on Hebrews 8:8-13 (on the new covenant) should be made. How the old testament passage (Jeremiah 31:31-34) is interpreted by the author of Hebrews is indeed a serious issue. Displacement of the Mosaic covenant by the new (Christian) covenant is the main theme of the Epistle to Hebrews (Halley, 1962).

Table 1 shows the nature of the New Covenant in contrast with the Old Covenant with as parameters. As shown, there are three categories of believers according to the timeline: Old Testament People (with no Bible at hand), New Testament People (with the Old Testament at hand) and Christians today (with both the Old and New Testaments at hand).

**Table 1. Nature of the New Covenant in contrast with the Old Covenant**

<b>Category of believers</b>	<b>Understanding on the role of the Law</b>	<b>Understanding on the tabernacle and the ark</b>	<b>Mode of revelation</b>
<b>Old Testament People (with no Bible at hand)</b>	Old covenant can be observed by righteous people.	Up to the holy place in the temple	Direct revelation from God
<b>New Testament People (with the Old Testament at hand)</b>	Old covenant can be observed only by “New Man”.	Up to the holy of holies in the temple	Direct revelation from Jesus Christ
<b>Christians today (with both the Old and New Testaments at hand)</b>	Old covenant only points to our sins.	Up to the Cherubim on the ark of the covenant in the temple	Direct revelation from the Holy Spirit

Source: Made by the author based on a personal communication with Kiyoshi Ishido (the author’s father who is an ordained pastor).

For the Old Testament people, observing the law of God was the only way to receive God’s blessings (this revelation came directly from God, and in terms of the temple where we worship our God, the understanding was up to the holy place at which they were in the presence of God. For the New Testament believers, it was understood that receiving righteousness through the sacrificial work in Jesus and becoming a “New Man” (Ephesians 2:15) with the capacity to observe the law. Since perfect reconciliation with God was established by Jesus for believers, the barrier to the holy of holies was removed.

Some two decades had passed since Paul, and believers today are still struggling with sinfulness. It would be suitable to understand that Paul’s description of a New Man will be fulfilled in an eschatological sense. The distinction between the New Testament people with the Old Testament (only) at hand and people believers with both the Old and New Testaments is subtle, but necessary. The role of Cherubim was to overshadow the atonement cover above the ark of the covenant

(Hebrews 9:5). It is up to our God how believers are made completely made new, and in this sense, believers can only come up to the Cherubim (as mentioned in Table 1): the blood of sacrificed animals was sprinkled on the cover of the ark of the covenant with Cherubim on it, that blood was not enough. That the sinners are declared righteous is made clear by Jesus, and in just one-time sacrifice of himself on the cross; yet why the believers today (with old sinful flesh because of the “already and not-yet” situation of salvation) can be made righteous remains God’s mystery.

The balance sheet concept in Table 2 might be helpful here: it shows the “balance sheet” of human condition and the new covenant. As the Table shows, the balance sheet of the new covenant can balance only when there is divine atonement by Jesus as mediator God. For Jeremiah as God’s messenger, the New Covenant incorporating the forgiveness of sins (Jeremiah 31:34) might have been somewhat of an enigma, since the debt of his fellow Jewish people was infinitely huge, and at the time of Jeremiah, understanding on the role of the law was moral (Exodus 20) and civil (Exodus 21-23); both point to outward conducts coming out of inward sin; and Pharisaic Judaism’s 613 commandments somewhat concentrated on the outward observance of God’s law. Exodus (25-31, 35-40) and Leviticus 9 point to the ritual law on sacrifices, pointing to the insufficiency of the effort to make an outward observance of the law. Forgiveness of sins has to come from sacrifice, and the new heart and new spirit are understood to be (mysterious) gifts of divine grace (Lundbom, 2004).

**Table 2. Balance sheet of the new covenant made clear by Jesus on the cross**

<b>Debt</b>	<b>Asset</b>
Sin (corporate as well as individual; infinitely large in the negative)	Sacrifice of Jesus as the mediator  (Note: No human merit through observing the law is added to the asset side)

Source: Made by the author.

Forgiveness of sins entails sacrifices, as the stipulation in Leviticus 9 and onwards implies. Since Jeremiah knew that, he had struggled and lamented, seeing all the unrighteousness of the people around him. The author of Hebrews points out in 10:18 that “where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin”. God found fault with the people of Jeremiah’s day (Hebrews 8:7) and gave the new covenant. The Mosaic covenant was made obsolete (Hebrews 8:13) because of the stubbornness of the people in Jeremiah’s time, not because of the imperfectness of the Mosaic law or the Ten Commandments in and of itself.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

Jeremiah was a man of struggle with his calling. Chapter 20:7 and onwards of the Book of Jeremiah surely shows that aspect. And Christians get an encouragement from his struggles, since that is exactly the reality faced by believers in the God of Israel. And the struggle of Jesus was foreshadowed by the struggle of Jeremiah. He did not always understand the full purpose of his prophecy (that is why he had struggled and lamented, as in Jeremiah 15:10-18), but God as the divine author surely foresee the fulfillment of his law.

Jeremiah, a human prophet and embedded in his own historical situation, was limited in his scope; yet as revelation progressed, his prophecy on the New

Covenant became clearer, especially to the believers today. Jesus as mediator (Old Testament) and Jesus as God (New Testament) poses a discontinuity between the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah. What is the message of the passage for today? The passage Jeremiah 31:31-34 invites believers to commit fully to the mysterious atoning work of God, without seeing its full realization as yet. The New Covenant is continuous with the old covenant in its spirit, i.e., God always commands us to “[b]e holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:1). The New Covenant in Jeremiah, however, is discontinuous with the Mosaic covenant, in the way the covenant is “cut”, i.e., the crucifixion and piercing of Christ Jesus.

Out of gratitude, Christians, having the New Covenant with God as the New Man, attempt to observe the Law of God as the Norm for humans. The situation of saved Christians, however, are: “already New Man, and not yet”. The existential question of “how should I change?” indeed relates to this *duality* situation. More broadly speaking, humans as ethical beings live under the tri-perspectives, i.e., all the approaches (i.e., normative, situational and existential ones) necessitate the remaining two, in order to be coherent before God. These perspectives cohere only when God-given inspiration (the normative perspective) finds peace (or harmony) with the situational and existential reality. The New Covenant does just this: the best human ethical conduct is to forge the New Covenant with God as God-given inspiration. Only after this (God-given inspiration being matched with human ethical conduct), human perspiration can follow, that is, ethical behaviors are encouraged to show gratitude toward God for the New Covenant.

Human irrationality to believe that humans are rational and sinless, leads to the unexpected consequence of sinful life. The new life as a source of ethical

knowledge comes only from the “irrational” (i.e., without any cause except for “love”) grace from God. It should be noted that Genesis was given to the people of God *after* the fall: The depiction of the *creation* of the world already incorporates the new creation through the New Covenant. The Law of God as the ethical norm already anticipates the human fallen (corrupt) situation as well as the existential problems of Adam and Eve (first humans created by God). In this sense, the tri-perspectival approach is in line with the need for new creation.

The New Covenant in the Bible has an indispensable ethical implication. Precisely because the Israelites could not observe the Law of God, the New Covenant was promised to the Israelites in the Old Testament, more specifically in the Book of Jeremiah. To conclude, can a New Man observe the Law of God? Yes indeed, if that “observe” means New Man’s accepting the New Covenant.

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