

# **INTERPRETING THE NEW COVENANT IN LIGHT OF ITS MULTIPLEXITY, MULTITEXTUALITY, AND ETHNOSPECIFICITY**

By

Layton Talbert, PhD.  
Professor of Theology and Biblical Exposition  
BJU Seminary  
Greenville, SC

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## INTERPRETING THE NEW COVENANT IN LIGHT OF ITS MULTIPLEXITY, MULTITEXTUALITY, AND ETHNOSPECIFICITY

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*Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, that I will perform that good thing which  
I have promised to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah.  
~ Jeremiah 33:14*

I have had the privilege of teaching New Testament Theology (NTT) on the seminary level for the past seventeen years, and Advanced NTT for almost as long. My own limited observation of the field in that short time mirrors Mark Saucy's:

It is one of the stunning ironies of academic biblical theology that the entity for which the New Testament corpus is named receives so little attention in understanding the New Testament's theology (Saucy 2014, 174).

A glance at the index of almost any NTT text bears out this assessment. Tom Schreiner (*New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ*) includes a few references to Jeremiah 31:31-34 but no reference to anything past 31:34<sup>1</sup> and no discussion of the new covenant. Ditto Frank Thielman (*Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach*), Donald Guthrie (*New Testament Theology*), and Leon Morris (*New Testament Theology*). I. Howard Marshall (*New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel*) has no reference to Jeremiah 34 or the new covenant. This is, to me, nothing short of astounding.<sup>2</sup>

I am aware that it is considered poor academic form to criticize an author for what he does *not* say. But if the NT is *named* for the new covenant and records<sup>3</sup> the inauguration of that new covenant,<sup>4</sup> then NTT is inextricably rooted in the new covenant. So, to write a book dedicated to NTT that never discusses the concept, passages, provisions, or theology of the new covenant—on its own terms and in its original context—seems, at best, a myopic preoccupation with a few similarities in flora without ever noticing the remarkable difference in forests.

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<sup>1</sup> The significance of this specific datum is addressed later in the paper. There are, of course, many other OT new covenant passages besides Jer 31; that, too, will be addressed later.

<sup>2</sup> Not technically of the NTT genre, G. K. Beale's *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* includes several references to the new covenant and to Jeremiah 31:31-34 but, again, nothing beyond 31:34. Premillennial NTT texts (e.g., Ryrie, Ladd, Zuck and Bock) fare a little better.

<sup>3</sup> According to the announcement of Jesus (Matt 26:28) and the teaching of Paul (2 Cor 3:6).

<sup>4</sup> *Inauguration* does not mean "fulfillment" but "initialization." The word allows select features of the new covenant to be operative without requiring all aspects of the new covenant to be operative. The meaning and consistent application of this word is a telling difference between dispensational and non-dispensational approaches.

The new covenant is the consummate covenantal arrangement (so far as we have been told) between God and man in time and on earth, “the sum of God’s story to its end, including the destinies of Israel, the nations, and even the cosmos itself” (Saucy 2014, 174). Understanding the new covenant contextually and exegetically, therefore, is basic to grasping the storyline, the theology, and the very structure of the Bible—not to mention NTT.

What I hope to demonstrate is that *the new covenant is a multidimensional prophetic covenant* [Multiplexity] *made explicitly with Israel in multiple passages* [Multitextuality] *and consisting of mostly Israel-specific promises* [Ethnospecificity] *which are most satisfactorily interpreted and fulfilled via a dispensational hermeneutic*. On the face of it, this thesis sounds remarkably pedestrian. The accent in this presentation, however, falls primarily on the multiplexity of the new covenant (and the consequent short-sightedness of treating Jer 31:31-34 as representing the new covenant *in toto*), and secondarily on a constellation of specific hermeneutical observations suggesting the weaknesses of a non-dispensational explanation of the new covenant.

## 1. THE ANTICIPATION OF THE NEW COVENANT

Moses intimated the need for a new covenant before the ink was dry on the old one. Deuteronomy 29:20-29 reads as if Israel’s failure and judgment under the terms of the old covenant are a foregone conclusion. The reference to their future captivity and restoration in 30:1-5 is just as matter-of-fact. The next statement, however, goes far beyond the provisions of the Mosaic covenant:

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants to love the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul, that you may live (Deut 30:6).

This is, to my knowledge, the earliest explicit anticipatory reference to a new covenant provision.<sup>5</sup> The old covenant made demands from the outside in; there were no provisions in the old covenant for such gracious, internal transformation as this statement describes. It is left to three prophets seven centuries later to fill out the provisions of this new covenant in detail. Here are the major extended OT passages on the new covenant, including the identifying phrase in each.<sup>6</sup>

- Jeremiah
  - 31:31-40—“new covenant” (31:31)
  - 32:36-44—“everlasting covenant” (32:40)
  - 33:14-26—“that good thing that I have promised to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah” (cf. Jer 31:31)
- Ezekiel

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Jer 32:39-40; Ezek 11:19-20; 36:26-27.

<sup>6</sup> I urge my readers, as I assign my students, to take one hour and read straight through the new covenant passages listed here. Everything I say in this paper hangs on the language of these passages. The more familiar you are with these passages from a first-hand contextual reading of them (rather than second-hand systematic theological assumptions), the better you will be able to assess what follows. I have found nothing so persuasive or formative to my thinking as reading these multiple passages on the same topic; collected into one reading, they reinforce each other and shed light on one another.

- 16:60-63—“everlasting covenant” (16:60)
- 34:11-31—“covenant of peace” (34:25)
- 36:16-38—no explicit covenant reference but identical descriptions
- 37:15-28—“everlasting covenant” (37:26); “covenant of peace” (37:26)
- Isaiah
  - 54:1-17—“covenant of peace” (54:10)
  - 55:1-13—“everlasting covenant” (55:3)
  - 59:20-62:12—covenant described in eternal terms (59:21); “everlasting covenant” (61:8)

Many other passages, of course, corroborate the details of the new covenant.<sup>7</sup> I have limited this list, however, to extended contextual units that explicitly refer to the “covenant.”<sup>8</sup>

## 2. THE CONTENTS OF THE NEW COVENANT

A detailed reading of the above passages suggests that the new covenant is far more comprehensive and meticulous than most theological treatments of it—both covenantal and dispensational. While the new covenant and the gospel overlap significantly, it is an oversimplification to equate them as coextensive. The new covenant contains the seeds of gospel realities, many of which spring to fruition in the NT but most of which continue to lie dormant until the eschaton.

Apart from systematic theological fiat, it is exegetically impossible to sever the soteriological dimensions of the new covenant from the Israel-specific and land-related promises that are woven into the warp and woof of that covenant. This is so for two reasons. The first is the most commonplace: the new covenant was expressly made “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” (Jer 31:31; 33:14), or to put an even finer point on it, with “the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Jer 33:26)—the most unambiguous designations imaginable for national Israel

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<sup>7</sup> E.g., Ezek 11:14-20; Zeph 3:1-20; Zech 12-14. As is frequent in prophecy, some of these passages interface current events and future prediction (i.e., between near and distant fulfillment). For instance, even though Jeremiah 31-33 toggle back and forth between the new covenant promises of eschatological regathering, restoration, and rebuilding and the historical promises of regathering, restoration, and rebuilding after the Babylonian captivity, the latter lie in the shadow cast by the looming and distant assurances of the new covenant. The smaller and more immediate events foreshadow the larger, later, and lasting fulfillment. Just as the wickedness, captivity, repentance, and return of Manasseh from Babylon (2 Chr 33) was a “pattern of exile and restoration” on the individual level for what Judah would experience on the national level (Thompson 1994, 370), the nation’s exile and return from Babylon was a microcosm of the eschatological regathering and restoration under the new covenant.

<sup>8</sup> The sole exception is Ezekiel 36 which is an extended passage with far too much new covenant language to omit. The parallels between Ezekiel 36 and Deuteronomy 30 are such a striking confirmation of Deuteronomy’s anticipation of the new covenant that I have included a comparative chart of those two passages in Appendix 1.

and ethnic Jews.<sup>9</sup> Second, God solemnized this covenant with those recipients by multiple sworn oaths<sup>10</sup> (more on that in a moment).

A habitual oversight on the part of both non-dispensationalists and dispensationalists facilitates the misconception that Jeremiah 31:31-34 *is* the new covenant. Functionally, this passage is much more akin to a preamble which introduces and briefly summarizes but does not remotely exhaust the detailed terms of the new covenant. To treat the seventy-three (Hebrew) words of Jeremiah 31:31-34 as the comprehensive expression of the new covenant while virtually ignoring the ten major passages and two dozen individual components (at least) of the new covenant is as mistaken as treating the fifty-two opening words of the Preamble to the U. S. Constitution as the comprehensive expression of that document while dismissing its seven articles and twenty-seven amendments as symbolic window-dressing.<sup>11</sup> Or, if you prefer a biblical analogy, saying Jeremiah 31:31-34 is “the” new covenant is like saying Isaiah 61:1-3 is “the” OT’s description of the messianic mission.

The chart below illustrates how multidimensional, multitextual, and ethnospecific the new covenant is. I have tried to tie the wording of each provision tightly to the text from which it is drawn.

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<sup>9</sup> This seems painfully obvious to any dispensationalist, but that these same words clearly do *not* mean national Israel and ethnic Jews has historically been equally painfully obvious to covenant theologians like Matthew Henry: “Observe who the persons are with whom this covenant is made—with the house of Israel and Judah, with the gospel Church, the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16), with the spiritual seed of believing Abraham and praying Jacob” (loc. cit.). Similarly Vern Poythress: “With whom is the new covenant made? It is made with Israel and Judah. Hence it is made with Christians by virtue of Christ the Israelite” (*Understanding Dispensationalists*, 106).

<sup>10</sup> Jer 31:35-37, 33:20-26; Isa 54:9-10. In other words, God not only affirmed “the immutability of his counsel” by expressing the promises of the new covenant in multiple passages, but also “confirmed it by an oath”—comprising “two immutable things [his word and his oath], in which it is impossible for God to lie” (to borrow the language of Heb 6:17-18). In addition to his divine oath, God frequently further guarantees his new covenant promises with the language of certainty (e.g., Isa 55:5; 60:9; 62:8, 11).

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed illustration of Jer 31:31-34 as the “preamble” to the new covenant, see Appendix 2.

## 2.1. Components of the New Covenant

#	Promise	Jeremiah	Ezekiel	Isaiah	Other
<b>Object:</b> “the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jer 31:31; 33:14), “the descendants of Jacob and David” (Jer 33:26), “the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Jer 33:26)					
1	God’s law will be internalized *	31:33			
2	God’s Spirit will be internalized *		36:27; 37:14		
3	God will be their God and they will be his people *	31:33; 32:38; (cf. 24:7)	34:30-31; 36:28; 37:23, 27		Zech 8:8
4	a nationwide individual knowledge of God *?	31:34 (cf. 31:1)		54:13	
5	iniquity forgiven and sin eternally forgotten / cleansing from sin *	31:34	36:25, 33; 37:23		Zech 3:1-10; 13:1ff
6	the eternal existence of Israel as God’s nation and covenant people is sworn	31:35-37; 33:23-26			
7	Jerusalem will be rebuilt, prosperous, and eternally secure	31:38-40; 33:16		60:1-62:12	
8	a universal regathering of Israel from all the nations	32:37; 33:26	36:24; 37:21; cf. 11:17	54:7	Deut 30:1-4; Zeph 3:20; Zech 8:8; 10:6-10
9	their permanent restoration to the land given to their fathers	32:37, 41	36:24, 28; 37:25; cf. 11:17	60:21	Deut 30:5
10	a sovereign, spiritual operation internally enabling them to obey and securing their loyalty to God forever *	32:39-40 (cf. 24:7)	36:26-27; 37:23; cf. 11:19-20	59:21	Deut 30:6, 8
11	perpetual divine favor on Israel is sworn	32:40, 42		54:7-10; 62:3-5	
12	Israel will be known for its righteousness (from God)	33:16		54:17; 60:17, 21; 61:3, 10-11; 62:1-2, 7, 12	
13	perpetuity of Davidic line is sworn (with an oath)	33:17, 20-22			
14	perpetuity of Levitical line is sworn (with an oath)	33:18, 20-22			
15	Israel & Judah will be reunited into one nation		37:15-22		
16	David will be established as their prince		34:23-24; 37:24-25		
17	a humbling remembrance of their past sin		16:61-63; 36:31-32		
18	<b>Israel</b> will be rebuilt, fruitful, and eternally secure		34:25-29; 36:29-30, 33-38	55:12-13; 61:4	Deut 30:9
19	international recognition of God’s unique blessing on Israel		36:23, 36; 37:28	61:9	
20	Israel’s international rejection and abuse will be forever reversed			54:14-17; 60:12, 14-15	Zeph 3:20
21	Jerusalem will be the center of international attention and worship			55:5; 60:1-62:12	Isa 2; Zech 8:22-23; 14:16-21
22	any nations who fail to honor Israel will be punished			60:12	Deut 30:7; Zech 14:12-14
23	God’s sanctuary will be in their midst forever		37:26-28		Zech 2:8-13
24	God will be their eternal light, overwhelming the sun and moon			60:19-20	Rev. 21:23; 22:5
<b>Motive:</b> the universal sanctification of God’s holy name (Ezek 36:21-23; cf. Matt 6:9) that he may be glorified (Isa 60:21; 61:3)					

### 2.1.1. *Soteriological Promises of the New Covenant*

The soteriological promises of the new covenant inevitably receive all the theological attention and emphasis (#1-5, 10). God will put his laws and his Spirit in his people's hearts,<sup>12</sup> transform them internally, grant forgiveness and deliverance from sins, and establish a permanent spiritual bond with them. These provisions find clear parallels in the NT. That means that only about 20% of the covenant's components (\*) have any NT citation indicating that they have been fulfilled and are applicable to NT believers.<sup>13</sup> The presence of those that are cited in the NT only underscores the conspicuous absence of the majority of new covenant promises which are never mentioned in the NT, let alone described as fulfilled.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, even the soteriological promises of the new covenant are not merely individual in application<sup>15</sup> but repeatedly and explicitly *national* in scope. The new covenant was made with Israel as a nation (Jer. 31:31-32) and promises to be fulfilled in Israel as a nation (Jer 31:33-34),<sup>16</sup> because God swears with an oath that Israel will never “cease to be a nation before me forever” (31:35-37). The soteriological elements may be extended on an individual basis in any era; but the covenant ultimately anticipates fulfillment on a national scale (cf. Rom 11:26). Moreover, woven into the fabric of these soteriological promises are details that also point to a necessarily Jewish application.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.1.2. *Israel-Specific Promises of the New Covenant*<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “Just as the new covenant [in] Jeremiah promised the facilitation of obedience by the internalization of the law, so the new covenant [in] Ezekiel would secure obedience through the presence of God's Spirit in the heart” (McComiskey 1985, 90). This difference in expression is consistent with the respective theological emphases in each prophet. Jeremiah mentions the law 12x (Ezekiel 4x); Ezekiel mentions the Holy Spirit 14x (Jeremiah 0x).

<sup>13</sup> I have marked #3 with a (\*) because although it is cited once in the NT (Heb 8) specifically to Jews, the NT nowhere applies it to the Church.

<sup>14</sup> G. K. Beale has made an extended effort to demonstrate the inaugural fulfillment of the land promises in the NT (Beale 2011, 756-72). Despite valiant exegetical effort on eight major passages to prove that thesis, the fact remains that the NT frequently cites new covenant soteriological promises but never cites any new covenant land promises.

<sup>15</sup> No one has ever been saved apart from the transforming grace of the gospel encapsulated in the new covenant. Because the new covenant contains the gospel in seed form, God extended the basic spiritual benefits of the new covenant to believing individuals living under the old covenant. That explains new covenant expressions under the old covenant (e.g., Isa 51:7; Ps 32:1-2, 37:31).

<sup>16</sup> This is the whole point of the guarantee that “they shall *all* know me”; that never was nor could be true under only the Mosaic covenant.

<sup>17</sup> The primary examples of this are seen in the chart itself and in the Israel-specific promises described below which are equally part of the new covenant; indeed, God's primary motive in establishing the new covenant, as stated by Ezekiel, is the sanctification of God's name “which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went” (Ezek 36:22)—an accusation that assumes a prior covenantal connection to God's name in a way that simply doesn't correspond to Gentiles converted into the Church. Beyond the covenant's broader context, however, Israel-specific threads are also woven tightly into some of the soteriological promises themselves (e.g., Ezek. 36:33).

<sup>18</sup> For an illustration that I often use to explain what I mean by “Israel-specific” see Appendix 3.



The new covenant is rooted in the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants<sup>19</sup> because it is the mechanism for facilitating and fulfilling all of those preceding covenants.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the new covenant is rooted in the national and historical identity of Israel as the recipient of all those covenants: “Just as I have brought all this great calamity [because they violated the Mosaic covenant] on *this people* [God’s people by virtue of the Abrahamic covenant], so I will bring *on them* all the good [including the Davidic covenant] that I have promised *them* [in the new covenant]” (Jer 32:42; cf. 31:28). Forever.<sup>21</sup> In fact, most of the new covenant promises are so nationally and historically grounded that they can be meaningfully applied only to those connected to that national-historical identity and experience. In addition, most are in some way linked to the land originally granted via the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>22</sup> Finally, these are not random, isolated prophecies. Because they are all components of the same covenant, they fall or stand together and either fail or find fulfillment via the new covenant.

#### 2.1.2.1. *Regathering*

One article of the new covenant (repeated multiple times) promises a universal regathering of Israel “from all the nations” to which God had scattered them (#8). I, for one, am part of no people group whose ancestors were driven out of a divinely-granted land and scattered among the nations in judgment. The NT never attempts to relate the new covenant promises of regathering to Gentiles or the Church at large. Nor were they fulfilled in the Babylonian return, because of the next point.

#### 2.1.2.2. *Restoration*

Tethered to the regathering promises of the new covenant are promises to replant those regathered in the same land originally covenanted to their fathers, forever (#9). The language could hardly be more explicit:

- “I will bring them back to *this place*” (Jer 32:37)
- “I will assuredly plant them in *this land* with all My heart and with all My soul” (Jer 32:41)
- “I will . . . bring you into *your own land*” (Ezek 36:24)
- “Then you shall dwell in *the land that I gave to your fathers*” (Ezek 36:28)

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<sup>19</sup> Personally I would also include the Levitical covenant as well (see #14, with references, in the chart).

<sup>20</sup> Through the new covenant the Abrahamic promise of both blessing and land in perpetuity is realized. The new covenant internalizes and enables obedience to the law of God that the Mosaic covenant imposed from without as “a yoke . . . which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear” (Acts 15:10), and justifies “from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39). And the new covenant reasserts the perpetuity of the Davidic covenant with an oath (Jer 33:20-22, 25-26) that is ultimately fulfilled by “Jesus the mediator of the new covenant” (Heb 12:24), “the Son of David” (Matt 1:1) and “Son of the Highest” who will receive “the throne of his father David” and “reign over the house of Jacob forever” (Luke 1:32-33).

<sup>21</sup> Jer 31:36, 40; 32:39, 40; Ezek 34:22, 28, 29; 37:22, 23, 25, 26, 28. The eternality of the new covenant is one of its signal features; that’s why it is also called “an everlasting covenant.”

<sup>22</sup> See #6-9, 13-16, 18-23 in the chart; each either states or necessitates, in one passage or another, some connection to the land.

- “Then they shall dwell in *the land that I have given to Jacob My servant, where your fathers dwell*; and they shall dwell there, they, their children, and their children's children, forever” (Ezek 37:25)

The final reference above negates the possibility that these new covenant restoration promises were fulfilled after the Babylonian captivity, since Israel was again booted out of their land by the Romans, for about 1800 years. These are eternal promises attached to an everlasting covenant. That’s why it is so important to read these promises in their full new covenant context.<sup>23</sup>

#### 2.1.2.3. *Reunification*

Folded into the new covenant is a promise to reunite Judah and Israel into one nation, forever (#15). It’s not at all clear in what sense this promise could be fulfilled in any meaningful way for anyone outside of those historical, national identities. Wound tightly<sup>24</sup> to that promise (37:15-22) is God’s pledge to cleanse and deliver “them” (this unified nation) from all their past sin (37:23), to give them “David” as their king (37:24),<sup>25</sup> to guarantee their ongoing obedience (37:24), to give them and their descendants “the land that I have given to Jacob” forever (37:25),<sup>26</sup> to make an everlasting covenant of peace with them (37:26), and to dwell in their presence forever as an international testimony to God’s sanctifying power and grace (37:27-28). It is a single, unified oracle all cut from the same new covenant cloth.

#### 2.1.2.4. *Reversal*

God also promises in this new covenant to reverse his posture towards Israel, forever (#11). By paralleling the divine source of Israel’s past judgment with the divine source of Israel’s future blessing, God identifies exactly who he has in mind:

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<sup>23</sup> The new covenant is, itself, nestled into a context addressing the certainty of the return from the Babylonian captivity (e.g., Jer 32:1-25), for the sake of comparison and contrast. The historical restoration was a temporary return of a still spiritually compromised people (just read Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi)—a pale shadow of the eschatological restoration described and promised under the new covenant.

<sup>24</sup> It’s important to note that this is not an argument that all these intertwined promises must be fulfilled *at the same time* (more on that later), but that they must all be fulfilled *to the same people* to whom they are promised.

<sup>25</sup> This Davidic promise may be a Messianic type fulfilled by Christ, though if that were God’s intent it would have been easy to communicate that much more clearly (“My Branch” or “My Servant”). Personally, I am inclined to see this as an intentionally literal reference to the rule of the resurrected David over Israel, under the universal millennial reign of the resurrected Christ.

<sup>26</sup> Several of these components also raise a question: Don’t the “eternal” promises require fulfillment in an eternal new earth (e.g., #13, 14, 18, 20, 23)? My own answer is that “eternal” (עולם) is governed by its context. “Forever” does not always mean as long as God exists; often it means as long as the current order lasts (e.g., Gen 43:9; Exod 21:6; Deut 13:16; Isa 32:14; Jer 35:6). E.g., no one supposes that Exod 21:5-6 requires a slave to belong to his Jewish master in the new earth. The Hebrew term conveys permanence for as long as the requisite circumstances prevail. In the context of the new covenant, the word may carry its full force, implying a situation that will continue into the new earth; or it may convey a modified sense, implying “until time ends.” Both the Abrahamic and NC promises are deeply anchored in the land; so “forever” is as long as the land exists. In fact, some translations (HCSB, NET) translate the Hebrew expression as “permanently” in connection with the land promises.

I will make an **everlasting covenant** with them that *I will not turn away from them*, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me. *I will rejoice over them to do them good and will faithfully plant them in this land with all My heart and with all My soul.* For thus says the LORD, *Just as I brought all this great disaster on this people, so I am going to bring on them all the good that I am promising them* (Jer 32:40-42 NASB).

In Isaiah, following the same contrast between his past actions and his future blessings that identifies the promise as Israel-specific (54:7-8), God certifies with an oath that his change of posture toward them will be eternal and unalterable:

For this is like the waters of Noah to Me; for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah would no longer cover the earth, so have I sworn that I would not be angry with you, nor rebuke you. For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My kindness shall not depart from you, nor shall My covenant of peace be removed, says the LORD, who has mercy on you (Isa 54:9-10).

#### 2.1.2.5. Renovation

The new covenant also promises the rebuilding, abundance, and perpetual security of not only Jerusalem (#7) but the entire land promised by God to Israel (#18). Again, the language in these passages is unambiguously Israel-specific.

#### 2.1.2.6. Recognition

This promissory category groups together new covenant provisions with international ramifications (#12, 19-22). The new covenant will reverse the way Israel has historically been viewed and treated by the world at large. God gives at least four reasons—in the new covenant—for reversing the nations’ posture and perception towards Israel; they are all linked not to Israel’s merits<sup>27</sup> but to God’s character:

- (1) Sovereignty—because he has freely chosen to favor the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob out of all the nations (Jer 33:24-26).
- (2) Mercy—because he has purposed to magnify before all the nations his grace in saving undeserving Israel (Isa 60:21; 61:3).
- (3) Purity—because he has resolved to purge his own reputation among the nations (Ezek 36:22-23).
- (4) Integrity—because he has determined to display to all the nations that he is a God who does exactly what he says (Ezek 36:36).

God’s salvation, whether of Jews or Gentiles, is always about the glory of his sovereignty, his mercy, his holiness, and his integrity. God has determined to make the fulfillment of his new covenant

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<sup>27</sup> “Yahweh’s salvific activity on Israel’s behalf is driven not primarily by pity for his people” (Block 1998, 2:421), or even by a sense of justice because she deserves better. Jews are historically distinct from all other peoples for the sole reason that God created them and chose them and bound himself to them voluntarily and verbally, out of pure sovereign grace (Deut 7). What is at stake in the fulfillment of all these new covenant promises to the Jews is not the Jews; what is at stake is the character and word of God. It’s not about the Jews; it’s about the trustworthiness of the words God chose to use.

promises to unfaithful, undeserving Israel Exhibit A to all the nations that he is the God whose words can always be trusted.

Then the nations which are left all around you shall know that I, the LORD, have rebuilt the ruined places and planted what was desolate. *I, the LORD, have spoken it, and I will do it* (Ezek 36:36).

### 2.1.3. *What about the Gentiles?*

The NT leaves no doubt that the new covenant has been inaugurated and its soteriological benefits extended to Gentiles as well as Jews.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, it's important to notice not only that Gentiles were not the original recipients of the new covenant, but also that the new covenant never mentions Gentile *inclusion* as one of its components.<sup>29</sup> The theme of Gentile inclusion in God's redemptive purposes comes from an independent line of divine promises predating the new covenant.<sup>30</sup>

Two separate rivers of the divine purpose—God's determination to bless the Gentiles with salvation and God's new covenant promises to Israel—converge to create the Church. That convergence is the “mystery” to which Paul refers in Ephesians 2-3. The new covenant becomes the instrument by which God extends his saving work to the Gentiles, because “the blood of the everlasting covenant” (Heb 13:20) is the means by which all God's saving work is accomplished (“for the Jew first, and also for the Gentile”), and because the Mediator of the new covenant is Christ (Heb 9:15, 12:24) in whom all of God's redemptive work centers.

Nevertheless the new covenant itself, as it stands, retains an expressly Judeo-centric orientation that anticipates an expressly Judeo-centric fulfillment, most of which revolves around the land-promises.

## 2.2. Confirmation of the New Covenant

The new covenant is not a single promise, or even a small cluster of spiritual promises. It is a covenantal archipelago glittering with dozens of detailed pledges and predictions—all addressed to Israel and Judah, all interconnected, and all confirmed by five sovereign oaths in which God ties their certainty to the most inviolable principles of creation itself.

Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for a light by day, the ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night, who disturbs the sea, and its waves roar (The LORD of hosts is his name): **If those ordinances depart from before Me**, says the LORD, then **the seed of Israel** shall also cease from being a nation before Me forever (Jer 31:35-36).

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<sup>28</sup> The fact that the new covenant was made with Israel does not mean its benefits cannot be extended to others (Rom 9:15); but it does mean that it must nevertheless be fulfilled, as stated, to those to whom it was made.

<sup>29</sup> This is all the more surprising in light of the fact that the Abrahamic covenant (and even the Mosaic covenant) include references to blessing on the Gentiles.

<sup>30</sup> E.g., Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; Deut 32:43; Ps 117:1; Isa 11:10; 60:3; Jer 16:19; Mal 1:11.

Thus says the LORD: **If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath**, I will also cast off all *the seed of Israel* for all that they have done, says the LORD (Jer 31:37).

Thus says the LORD: **If you can break My covenant with the day and My covenant with the night, so that there will not be day and night in their season**, then My covenant may also be broken *with David* My servant, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and *with the Levites*, the priests, My ministers (Jer 33:20-21).

**As the host of heaven cannot be numbered, nor the sand of the sea measured**, so will I multiply *the descendants of David* My servant and *the Levites* who minister to Me (Jer 33:22).

Moreover the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, Have you not considered what these people have spoken, saying,<sup>31</sup> The two families which the LORD has chosen, he has also cast them off? Thus they have despised My people, as if they should no more be a nation before them. Thus says the LORD: **If My covenant is not with day and night, and if I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth**, then I will cast away *the descendants of Jacob and David* My servant, so that I will not take any of his descendants to be rulers over *the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*. For I will cause their captives to return, and will have mercy on them (Jer 33:23-26).

Biblical theology is about not only what God says, but how he has chosen to say it. It is difficult to envision how God could have made it any clearer that national Israel would never be cast aside or cease to exist (Jer 31:35-37). Some have generalized this passage as a promise “that the new covenant would be endless in duration” (Ryken 2001, 473). But the oath says nothing about the new covenant at all; it’s a promise of the perpetuity of those with whom he made the new covenant (Israel). Similarly, the ESV Study Bible’s explanatory note on vv. 35-36 reads: “God gives a fixed order to the natural creation, and it is just as impossible for the new covenant to cease as it is for the natural order to cease” (Ortlund 2008, 1432). That’s true, but astonishingly irrelevant to what God actually said in the text being explained. What he promised was that “the seed [offspring] of Israel” would never cease to exist “as a nation before me forever.” God immediately utters a second oath in v. 37, where the ESV note explains: “The full extent of creation is unfathomable and it is equally unfathomable that God would cast off the Israel of this new covenant” (ibid.). But that’s not how the text reads. The note tweaks the text with the addition of a single word (“*the* Israel of this new covenant”). It’s a small word, but it opens a hole big enough to drive an entire systematic theology through. The implication is that “the Israel” in view is a different “Israel” than the one being addressed in the historical context.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Jer 33:24 has often struck me as a remarkably accurate description of old-line, hard supersessionist covenant theologians.

<sup>32</sup> God might have said (in 31:36), “then *the seed of Abraham* shall cease from being a *people* before me”—but he didn’t. He could have said (in 31:37), “then I will cast off all *the seed of Abraham*”—but he didn’t. If God had made the new covenant with “the seed of Abraham” it would have furnished significant biblical theological warrant for applying it to the Church (cf. Gal 3:29). I.e., if that had been God’s intent all along, he could have made that far clearer. Biblical theology is not only about what God says, but how he has chosen to say it.

The timelessness of God's commitment in these divine oaths is not merely to believers, but to a nation that he will graciously convert into a nation of believers, to the international fame of his name and as a testimony that he is a God of his word. And yet the history of theology supplies ample evidence that we theologians can be wonderfully creative with the text when there's something we want it to say.

What is at stake in how we handle these new covenant oaths, and the promises that they are intended to guarantee as inviolable, is nothing less than the integrity of God and the trustworthiness of his words. There could be no more sober caution to any theologian, and no more telling test of any theological system, than that.<sup>33</sup>

New covenant language and parallels in the NT prevent us from reserving all of its promises exclusively for Israel (as some dispensationalists have attempted to argue). At the same time, the NT's utter silence on the new covenant's many Israel-specific promises prohibits us from collapsing the entire new covenant into a purely spiritual manifesto fulfilled now in the Church. Even a future conversion of ethnic Israel, which many covenant theologians now acknowledge, does not alone satisfy the multiplexity and ethnospecificity of the new covenant.

### 3. THE CENTRALITY OF THE LAND IN THE NEW COVENANT

Land is one of the threads that runs through God's entire covenant relationship with Israel. In the Abrahamic covenant God promised to Abraham and to his descendants, among other things, a specific piece of geography, forever.<sup>34</sup> Under the Mosaic covenant God gave that land to Abraham's descendants and warned that if they broke their covenant obligations he would evict them from it (and he did), but also promised that he would bring them back into that land (and he did, though they were later evicted again). The new covenant promises that one day God will return them to that land permanently and change them internally so that they will never again forsake him. That hasn't happened yet.

Any interpretation of the new covenant, then, must decide what to do with its persistent and explicit references to the land. What is to be done, for example, with the explicit geographical and topographical details in Jeremiah 31:38-40?<sup>35</sup> These verses describe the rebuilding of Jerusalem along its northern, western, southern, and eastern boundaries, respectively. God attaches unmistakably

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<sup>33</sup> It seems a remarkable oversight that G. K. Beale's (2011) one-thousand-page magisterial work, which focuses on "the unfolding of the Old Testament in the New" and gives so much attention to the new covenant, includes no discussion of any of these divine-oath passages. These are not random texts that I happen to think he should have covered; they are the divine oaths that anchor the meaning and intentions of the new covenant.

<sup>34</sup> Gen 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:7, 18; 17:8; 24:7; 26:3; 28:4, 13; 35:12; 50:24. An often overlooked detail of the Abrahamic covenant is that God promised the land not merely to Abraham's seed, but to Abraham himself. For a millennial argument based on this fact, see section 5.2 at the end of this paper.

<sup>35</sup> This passage exemplifies the importance of my earlier point about seeing Jer 31:31-34 as merely the preamble to the new covenant, followed by the divine oaths in 31:35-37, and the geographical specifics in 31:38-40. The first major reference to the new covenant is not 31:31-34, but 31:31-40.

and, more to the point, *unnecessarily* explicit geographical language about what he is going to do to their capital city and their land as part of the new covenant. Interpreters understand that this is still part of the new covenant, but Kidner turns one detail on its head when he argues, “[T]he promise that the city would never again be overthrown (31:40) is a further sign that we must look beyond ‘the present Jerusalem’ to ‘the Jerusalem above’ (Gal 4:25-26)” (Kidner 1987, 111). Why? Because Jerusalem was overthrown again in AD 70. But history did not end in AD 70. The promise of Jerusalem’s perpetual security compels us to look beyond post-Babylon Jerusalem; but it does not compel us to look beyond an as-yet future earthly Jerusalem.<sup>36</sup>

This geographical specificity keeps showing up throughout the discussion of the new covenant that spans Jeremiah 31-33.

Now therefore, thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning *this city* of which you say, “It shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence”: Behold, I will gather them out of all countries where I have driven them in My anger, in My fury, and in great wrath; *I will bring them back to this place*, and I will cause them to dwell safely. . . . And I will make an *everlasting covenant* with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me. Yes, I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will assuredly plant them *in this land*, with all My heart and with all My soul. For thus says the LORD: Just as I have brought all this great calamity on this people, so I will bring on them all the good that I have promised them [new covenant]. And fields will be bought *in this land* of which you say, “It is desolate, without man or beast; it has been given into the hand of the Chaldeans.” Men will buy fields for money, sign deeds and seal them, and take witnesses, *in the land of Benjamin, in the places around Jerusalem, in the cities of Judah, in the cities of the mountains, in the cities of the lowland, and in the cities of the South*, for I will cause their captives to return, says the LORD (Jer 32:36-44).

God could hardly make it clearer that he has the earthly Jerusalem in view. If God knowingly means something entirely different from what he knows will be understood by the terms he uses, it is difficult to escape the impression that he is misleading people—seriously and unnecessarily, because he did not need to be this specific if the natural meaning of his words was not his intention.

It is impossible to read through the Bible attentively and conclude that land is an inconsequential detail.<sup>37</sup> It is a tenacious and explicit theme in the OT. So it should hardly be surprising that the new covenant reiterates this land component *repeatedly* (Jer 32:40-41; Ezek 34:13, 25-27; 36:24, 28, 34-35; 37:12, 14, 21-22, 25), *explicitly* (“the land that I gave to your fathers,” Ezek 36:28; “the land that I have given to Jacob,” Ezek 37:25), and *insistently* (“I will plant them in this land with all my heart and with all my soul,”<sup>38</sup> Jer 32:41). This is what even the Mosaic covenant anticipated—not just a

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<sup>36</sup> I love Kidner as a commentator, but what turns Kidner’s interpretation here on its head is the prosaic reality of 1948. Whether the re-creation of the state of Israel was a fulfillment of prophecy or not, it was undeniably a providential performance of miraculous proportions. To deny that is to shut one’s eyes to the hand of God in the present world (as so many Israelis have done), and to deny his sovereign rule over the affairs of nations.

<sup>37</sup> See Appendix 4 for 60 OT references to God’s giving the land to Abraham and his descendants.

<sup>38</sup> God rarely talks like this; such impassioned language expresses how serious he is about this promise.



temporary return to the land after captivity, but a return to the land accompanied by internal transformation that would enable them to love and obey God, and possess the land forever (Deut 30:5-10). That's why at the heart of the debate over the fulfillment of the new covenant is the issue of the land.

## 4. NEW COVENANT EXPECTATIONS

The new covenant is a multiplex prophetic and promissory covenant made with ethnic Israel, a constellation of promises that revolve around two major events: the national conversion and the national restoration of national Israel. Theological views on those prophetic expectations have varied considerably over the centuries (Vlach 2014, 197-209),<sup>39</sup> but they have tended to gravitate toward one of two major hermeneutical orientations.

### 4.1. Supersessionism

Some have argued that because Israel rejected Messiah, God abandoned the nation and bears no further relationship or obligation to Israel (*qua* Israel); consequently all her promises are transferred to and fulfilled in the Church. This view is broadly known as replacement theology or supersessionism,<sup>40</sup> though like any systematic theological view, it has developed a number of permutations over the years.

The older view just described has been largely abandoned and replaced with a more moderate form of supersessionism that still denies any future national role or restoration of Israel to the land, but affirms a future conversion of ethnic Israel, in keeping with Romans 11:26-27.<sup>41</sup> (Incidentally, Paul ties this national conversion to a new covenant passage, Isa 59:20-21; I'll explore the significance of that shortly.)

One of the most recent permutations, the progressive covenantal view espoused by Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum in *Kingdom through Covenant*, holds "that a large number of Jews will turn to Christ in the eschaton and that all peoples will experience the fulfillment of the land promise in the eternal new creation" (Kuhlewind 2018, 478). G. K. Beale's version of modified supersessionism denies any such future conversion for Israel, and thinks that the land-related promises "are fulfilled in a physical form" in the new earth "but that the inauguration of this fulfillment is mainly spiritual" in the present Church (Beale 2011, 751).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> For a more detailed treatment see Vlach 2010, 27-76.

<sup>40</sup> I neither see nor use this in any way as a pejorative term, merely a descriptive one.

<sup>41</sup> Erickson 2013, 964; Grudem 1994, 1104; Horton 2006, 132; Schreiner 2008, 859-60; Thielman 2005, 370. These theologians generally avoid "replacement" terminology and prefer to describe the Church as the "fruit" of Israel (Horton 2006, 131), "spiritual Israel" (Erickson 2013, 964), the "new Israel" or "true Israel" (Schreiner 2008, 36, 860), or even "restored Israel" (Thielman 2005, 707).

<sup>42</sup> Though Beale denies a future conversion of ethnic Israel, in what must rank as one of the most ironic statements of his 1072-page *Biblical Theology of the NT* he explains that space constraints prevent any detailed discussion of Rom 11:26 (2011, 710).



All these modifications reflect, to one degree or another, a welcome shift in what I view as the right direction, though in my estimation they still fall short of what both the text and the trustworthiness of God require. Here are some reasons why.

#### **4.1.1. *Interpretational Inconsistency: Why are some new covenant promises literal but not others?***

The fact that the new covenant's soteriological promises are fulfilled literally for Jews raises an intriguing question. If one is willing to affirm (as many covenant theologians are) that all of the soteriological elements of the NC are going to be literally fulfilled to literal Israel in a future nationwide conversion (on this present earth), what would prevent that one from affirming (consistently, it seems) that all of the new covenant's non-soteriological promises will also be just as literally fulfilled to literal Israel in the future (on this present earth)?<sup>43</sup>

In other words, a minority of the new covenant's promises will be literally fulfilled for literal Israel on the present earth, yet the majority of its promises will not be. Instead, the latter are fulfilled figuratively in the Church now<sup>44</sup> or literally only in the new earth.<sup>45</sup> The exegetical basis for such an inconsistent hermeneutic is far from clear. Moreover, this interpretational inconsistency seems to rest on a logical fallacy.

#### **4.1.2. *Logical Fallacy: Why does it have to be all at once?***

Such interpreters rightly recognize that the NT extends the soteriological promises of the new covenant beyond ethnic Israel, but seem to assume that, therefore, the *entire* new covenant must necessarily now be fulfilled and in force. In other words, *inauguration* (the new covenant has now been initiated) is mistaken for *fulfillment* (the new covenant has now been fulfilled).<sup>46</sup>

"Inaugurated" implies what Beale calls "beginning fulfillment" (Beale 2011, 729); but it does not require (as Beale argues) that every provision of the new covenant must, in some sense, be currently

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<sup>43</sup> I posed this question to Frank Thielman via email and his reply was both gracious and, well, frank: "I really need to give your question more attention, and it gives me a lot of food for thought. I think my biggest concern in imagining a literal fulfillment of several of the elements you mention . . . on your list is that these elements seem to be given a less-than-literal fulfillment in the New Testament itself. The ingathering of scattered Israel, for example, seems to find its fulfillment in the multi-ethnic Church, if my reading of the shepherdding imagery in John is correct. Jerusalem now seems to be the Jerusalem above (Gal 4:21-31; Rev 21:9-27)." Both of these points seem to me to give inadequate weight to the multiple and repeated references to precise geographical and topographical details woven into the New Covenant (e.g., Jer. 31:38-40, 32:36-44). Thielman continues: "I do not think that Rom 11:26 can be read in any other way than as a reference to a vast influx of ethnic Jews into the people of God in the last days. These other elements, however, seem to me to be fulfilled in less literal ways and that makes me think that other elements of the language of Israel's eschatological restoration in the Old Testament should also be read in less than literal ways."

<sup>44</sup> The "promises made to Israel are fulfilled in the Church as the new people of God, the new Israel (1 Pet 2:9-10)" (Schreiner 2008, 36).

<sup>45</sup> Beale 2011, 751.

<sup>46</sup> On this reasoning, God's blessing of Ishmael and Esau with some of the same benefits promised to Abraham (numberless descendants and a land inheritance) would have signaled the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant; but clearly it didn't.

realized. Beale is correct that all the promises of the new covenant are “intertwined with one another and, from the OT vantage point, were to occur simultaneously” (Beale 2011, 771). But there are two counterpoints to be made here.

First, the crucial qualifier is the phrase “from the OT vantage point.” When Jesus read Isaiah 61:1-3 in his hometown synagogue, he stopped abruptly in mid-sentence after the first line of 61:2, excluding “the day of vengeance of our God.” Then he closed the scroll and announced, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:17-21). All the elements in Isaiah 61:1-3 are (to borrow Beale’s language) “intertwined with one another and, from the OT vantage point, were to occur simultaneously.” And yet, they didn’t.<sup>47</sup> Jesus’ exclusion of the judgment component of what was from all appearances a seamless and “intertwined” prophecy signifies that prophecies may, in fact, be inaugurated without being fulfilled in their entirety. It would be a serious mistake, both hermeneutically and theologically, to insist (on the basis of Luke 4:21) that the rest of the Isaiah 61 oracle had to be fulfilled during Jesus’ first coming and then set about looking for ways in which it “must” have been fulfilled symbolically. It is just as mistaken to insist that the non-soteriological, Israel-specific promises of the new covenant “must” be fulfilled now in the Church, when the NT is as silent about them as Jesus was about Isaiah 61:3b.

Second, Beale’s argument operates on the basis of a major oversight—the national scope of the new covenant.<sup>48</sup> The covenant has been inaugurated through Christ and its soteriological benefits extended to both Jew and Gentile on an individual basis. But what will signal its imminent and ultimate fulfillment is Israel’s covenantal transformation *as a nation* (Rom 11:26; cf. Zech 12:10-14). When that happens, *then* the spiritual and physical promises will be “intertwined with one another and . . . occur simultaneously.”

The idea that a prophecy “may have an anticipatory fulfillment . . . without exhausting the full prediction” (Köstenberger and Patterson 2011, 328) is not a new or narrowly held view; it is simply not applied by supersessionists to the new covenant, which is treated as an all-or-nothing proposition.

#### ***4.1.3. False Comparison: How can a promise be a symbol?***

If a symbol is *intended* by an author, then a literal interpretation actually demands that we take the symbol symbolically, not literalistically. When a teenager says, “I’m bringing my own set of wheels to the game tonight,” a literal interpretation demands that we understand him to mean that he’ll be driving his car to the game, not that he will show up lugging two tires on each arm. Literal interpretation understands that metaphor is a normal part of literal communication.

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<sup>47</sup> Jesus elsewhere clearly taught that he had not come this time to judge (Jn 12:47).

<sup>48</sup> A supersessionist, of course, would not consider this an oversight but, rather, just a very different reading of the covenant’s audience and intent.

Supersessionists believe that the NT teaches us that many (most, in point of fact) of the new covenant promises are actually intended to be understood symbolically. So when they interpret new covenant promises symbolically, they claim a literal hermeneutic—because the NT, by using various OT elements symbolically, teaches us that the OT is intentionally symbolic. For instance, the book of Hebrews explains that the old covenant sacrificial system was full of “signs” and shadows” of spiritual realities (Heb 8:5). Galatians 4 uses Hagar and Sarah as an “allegory” of two different covenants.<sup>49</sup> The NT is signaling us, therefore, that the OT was an intentionally typological book presenting spiritual realities under the guise of symbols.

But this argument depends on comparing two very different categories—not just apples and oranges; more like apples and orangutans. There is a fundamental, qualitative difference between, on the one hand, a literal event (like the exodus), or institution (like the sacrificial system), or person (like Hagar and Sarah), or place (like Jerusalem) being used as a type of some spiritual reality, and, on the other hand, arguing that a *promise* is a type or symbol of some spiritual reality. A promise is a speech-act, a character commitment.

A promise entails an obligation. When somebody makes a promise, they’re not just stating something, they are doing something. They are forming a relationship and creating an expectation that carries moral obligation (Blaising 2014, 160).

The expectation created by a covenant—whether Genesis 12 or 2 Samuel 7 or Jeremiah 31—is grounded in what the recipient, based on his cultural, historical, and revelational context, could reasonably be expected to understand from the terms promised. “To postulate a ‘fulfillment’ of these covenant promises” based on an interpretation of the terms that was inaccessible to the recipient “overlooks the performative nature of the word of promise, violates the legitimate expectations of the recipients, and brings the integrity of God into question” (Blaising 2014, 161).

The scriptural principles of progressive revelation and self-interpretation neither mean nor require “that the later Scriptures in the New Testament *reinterpret* the Old Testament sayings” (Kaiser 2009, 134 original emphasis). The view that the NT provides a new hermeneutical lens that significantly alters the meaning and referents of OT prophecy rests, moreover, on a hermeneutical fallacy.

#### **4.1.4. *Hermeneutical Fallacy: Why does it have to be either-or?***

The universalization of God’s redemptive purposes does not necessarily universalize all particular prophetic promises targeted at a specific audience. Again, Craig Blaising puts it succinctly.

Isaiah foresaw the extension of the favored term “my people” to Gentile nations *in addition to not in substitution of or redefinition of* Israel (Isa 19:24-25). . . . God’s plans for Israel and the nations are not mutually exclusive or successive programs but complementary throughout the entire canonical

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<sup>49</sup> Not all agree on which covenant Sarah signifies, the new or the Abrahamic; a degree of ambiguity and subjectivity is an occupational hazard when it comes to interpreting symbols.

narrative. It is not necessary to eliminate the particular in order to institute the universal nor is it necessary to expand the particular to become the universal (Blaising 2014, 162, original emphasis).

Supersessionists argue that the land promise to Abraham was universalized to include the whole world (Rom 4:13). But if the promise of a specific geographical inheritance (Gen 15:7, 18; 17:8; 28:4, 13, etc.) is swallowed up in a world-inheritance, so that the land-related promises of the new covenant are globalized, then how do we make any sense out of the original terms of the promise? If “the land” becomes “the world,” and the new covenant promises to bring Israel back into the land God gave to their fathers, then how will God “bring them back into” . . . the world? Granted, the overall promise has expanded from “I will give you this land” to “the meek shall inherit the earth.” The latter *expands* the former, but it does not and cannot *negate* the former.<sup>50</sup>

Before we argue, therefore, that the NT posits a new hermeneutical grid for how we interpret the new covenant’s non-soteriological promises, we need to answer this question: Does the NT *require* an either-or decision that “entails a radically revised understanding of God’s faithfulness to his promises” (Satterthwaite 2000, 49)?<sup>51</sup> Or does the NT allow a both-and hermeneutical approach that **both** (a) recognizes an *inauguration* of the new covenant that graciously extends its soteriological benefits beyond the original recipients, **and** (b) expects an equally literal fulfillment of *all* its promises to those to whom God originally swore them.<sup>52</sup> The concept of present inauguration (what some call partial or progressive fulfillment) with later completion (final fulfillment) is a widely recognized prophetic phenomenon. Why not recognize the possibility that this is what’s going on here, if it allows us to preserve the integrity of God by handling all his words consistently?

#### ***4.1.5. Exegetical Challenge: How can some new covenant promises possibly be fulfilled in the new earth?***

In a welcome step toward a more consistently literal hermeneutic, many covenant theologians have proposed that the land-related promises of the new covenant are fulfilled literally in the new earth (Poythress 1994, 132-33). Nonetheless, other loosely land-related promises involve conditions that would be nonsensical in the glorified and sinless new earth. For example, the new covenant incorporates threats to any nations that will not honor Israel (Isa 60:12), but that cannot be a potential in the new creation. Built into the new covenant is also the implication of procreation and ongoing generations in the land (Jer 32:39), which is also contrary to other revelation about resurrection life on the new earth. A comprehensive view of all the components of the new

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<sup>50</sup> This point is significant since most covenantal explanations of the land-promise make it sound for all the world as if Israel inherits everything *but not the land*.

<sup>51</sup> Satterthwaite is not wildly overstating what supersessionism requires; he is, as a supersessionist, simply explaining what the NT fulfillment of OT prophecies requires of us—“a radically revised” conception of what it means for God to be faithful to his words. I find profoundly disturbing any hermeneutic that necessitates radically redefining something as profoundly basic as divine integrity—that God could say something that he has given us every reason to believe means “this” when he actually means “that.”

<sup>52</sup> Personally, I would say the NT positively *encourages* a both-and hermeneutic, by quoting very selectively only from the soteriological provisions of the new covenant, leaving the rest of it intact, and studiously avoiding labeling the Church with new covenant recipient language.

covenant seems to warrant literal fulfillment to national Israel in a coming kingdom prior to the new creation.<sup>53</sup>

## 4.2. Restorationist Expectations

If the new covenant still anticipates the restoration of Israel to their land, why isn't there confirmation of this in the NT? In my view, there is. It is muted, for several reasons. The spiritual conversion and transformation of the nation takes priority. Moreover, in inaugurating the new covenant "God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name" (Acts 15:14). Relatedly, because of Israel's unbelief "hardening in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (Rom 11:25). How long that will take is anyone's guess but God's. Nevertheless, there is a subtle but firm assumption throughout the NT that the Israel-specific dimension of the new covenant is still waiting in the wings.

### 4.2.1. *Luke 1*

Inseparably attached to the angelic announcement that Christ was coming is the angelic explanation of why he was coming: "He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:33; cf. Jer 33:26). There is no exegetical basis, here or anywhere else, for interpreting "the house of Jacob" as anything other than national, ethnic Israel.<sup>54</sup> The only texts that identify "the house of Jacob" as the Church are systematic theology texts, not biblical texts. For the Messiah to fulfill this angelic proclamation assumes Israel's presence in the land God promised he would give to them forever.

### 4.2.2. *Luke 22; Matthew 19*

The night before his sacrificial death that would initiate the new covenant, Jesus granted to his disciples a kingdom (Luke 22:29-30). In Matthew's parallel, Jesus specifies that this will be "in the *regeneration* when the Son of Man sits on the throne of his glory" (19:28).<sup>55</sup> In what Jesus calls "the regeneration," not only will he be sitting upon his throne, but his disciples "will also sit on twelve thrones, *judging the twelve tribes of Israel*" (19:28). Since there will be nothing to adjudicate in a sinless

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<sup>53</sup> The only exception to this statement might seem to be #24. Some take the description of Isa 60:19-20 as purely metaphorical (Grogan 1986, 6:331). Smith points out that "60:19 does not say that God will destroy or remove the sun and the moon, just that they will be redundant and rather unnecessary" in light of the glory of God's presence (Smith 2009, 626).

<sup>54</sup> Some interpreters have a remarkable ability to look straight through the unambiguous language of a text and see the exact opposite. Christ's reign, says one, will be "not over an earthly people, but over the spiritual Israel" (Geldenhuis 1979, 76).

<sup>55</sup> The Greek word (*παλιγγενεσία*) occurs only here and Tit 3:5 in the entire Greek Bible. Philo used it to describe the renewal of the earth following the Flood (*The Life of Moses*, II:65), and Josephus to refer to the "rebuilding and restoration" of Judah after the return from the Babylonian captivity (*Antiquities of the Jews*, XI:3:9). It is translated variously here: "the regenerated world" (CJB); "the Messianic Age" (HCSB); "when all things are renewed" (NET). ESV's "the new world" seems to imply the new earth (2 Pet 3; Rev 21), which fails to fit the rest of the details in Matthew 21 (e.g., see next footnote).

new earth,<sup>56</sup> a reference to “the Messianic Age” (HCSB)—that is, the earthly millennial kingdom—fits the details here and parallels the implications of Acts 3:21 (see below). The disciples took this promise quite literally (Matt 20:20-21)—an understanding that Jesus plainly confirmed (20:23).

### 4.2.3. Acts 1, 3

Only a month or so later, after his resurrection, the disciples asked Jesus, “Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Jesus’ reaction to the disciples’ question differs radically from the reaction of many interpreters:<sup>57</sup> “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7 ESV).

Their question is “a natural one for Jews who have embraced the messianic hope” and Christ’s response “does not reject the premise of the question that the kingdom will one day be restored to Israel” (Bock 2007, 61-62). Jesus displays no disapproval or disappointment with the disciples (unlike many interpreters), and leaves their expectation of a divinely instituted, potentially imminent, national and geo-political kingdom completely intact. But there is another overlooked verse that is crucial to bring into this conversation.

A few days later Peter, preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem, uses a noun form (“restoration”) of the same verb used in 1:6 (“restore”):

Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive *until the period of **restoration** of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time* (Act 3:19-21 NASB).

The word “restoration” is significant—not the remaking, or the transforming, but the *restoring* of all things predicted by the prophets awaits the return of Christ. What prophets? Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—in all those new covenant passages. If you want to know what that “restoration” looks like, read their new covenant prophecies. Far from claiming it had arrived in Christ, Peter declared that the restoration described by the prophets was still future. His language in this passage—especially in light of the exchange in 1:6-8—indicates that the Israel-oriented kingdom restoration that they anticipated in 1:6 (and continued to preach and anticipate throughout their lives) awaits the return and personal presence of Christ.

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<sup>56</sup> Some have suggested that “judging” simply has reference here to leadership, citing the verb’s use in the LXX (Jud 3:10; 10:1-2; 12:7). However, (1) this OT use always involved specifically military leadership in battle against Israel’s enemies, (2) nothing in these OT verses precludes the additional sense of adjudication, (3) we know that Israel’s judges were often involved in adjudication (e.g., Jud 4:4-5), and (4) this verb never demonstrably conveys the idea of governing in the NT. It is significant that the *only* passages where it is suggested that *κρίνω* “could have the broader sense of *rule*” (BDAG) are Matt 19:28 and Luke 22:30—the very passages under interpretational dispute. If that were the intended sense in these passages, however, the natural word would have been *ἄρχω* or (in view of the mention of thrones) *βασιλεύω*.

<sup>57</sup> For an instructive sampling of how some interpreters handle the disciples’ question, see Appendix 5.

#### 4.2.4. Romans 11

Paul's prayer to God for Israel was that they would be saved (Rom 10:1). The answer to that prayer is predicted in 11:26: "All Israel shall be saved." To back up that statement, Paul cites Isaiah 59:20-21 (a new covenant passage), capping off an extended discussion (Rom 9-11) that maintains a persistent distinction between Israel and Gentiles throughout. Indeed, his whole argument rests on that distinction.<sup>58</sup>

Equally importantly, Paul follows the promise of Israel's nationwide salvation in 11:26 with an axiomatic assurance: "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (11:29 ESV). One of those "gifts" affirmed throughout the OT, and in the new covenant particularly, is their restoration to the land which he had sworn to their fathers—even though Paul is here stressing the soteriological dimension for the reasons I stated at the beginning of this section.

### 5. CONCLUSION

#### 5.1. A Historical Reminder

The new covenant is a multiplex prophetic promise made explicitly with the nation of Israel in multiple passages which is most satisfactorily interpreted and fulfilled via a dispensational hermeneutic. This major hermeneutical alternative to the various versions of the supersessionist view sees the new covenant as (a) providing the means by which God graciously extends to the Gentiles the soteriological blessings promised to Israel, and (b) promising a future nationwide conversion of ethnic Israel, but also (c) guaranteeing a future restoration of national Israel to the land God originally promised to Abraham and to his seed.

This is not a bizarre or recent view. I have already referenced Michael Vlach's historical survey of both supersessionism and restorationism throughout church history. In addition to the many historical examples of restorationism he cites, I'll include just one that he doesn't.

John Edwards (1637-1716) was an Anglican, a Calvinist, a postmillennialist, a covenant theologian, and a convinced restorationist. In 1699 he published *A Compleat History or Survey of All the Dispensations and Methods of Religion*.<sup>59</sup> Though a covenant theologian, he came to be convinced by Scripture<sup>60</sup> of the future and complete conversion of Israel as well as their restoration to the land of Judah (691-721)—at a time when nothing could have seemed historically less likely.<sup>61</sup> Given his

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<sup>58</sup> I briefly offer my own interpretation of the "root" in Rom 11:17-18 in Appendix 6.

<sup>59</sup> When I first located this 3-century-old, 775-page work it was available from Yale University Library in microform. Now it can be accessed on Google Books.

<sup>60</sup> He discusses Lev 26, Deut 30, Isa 11 and 60, Hos 3, Amos 9, Zech 12, Luke 2 and 21, 2 Cor 3, and especially Rom 11.

<sup>61</sup> Also, though a postmillennialist, he corroborates the virtual universal adherence to premillennialism during the first three centuries of the Church (651-53).

historical context, his persuasion of Israel's eventual restoration was a remarkable position of faith in the clarity and reliability of God's words.

## 5.2. An Unexpected Biblical Theological Argument for the Land

In Matthew 22:23-33 Jesus argued for the resurrection on the basis of a present tense verb in Exodus 3:6 (implicit in the Hebrew OT, explicit in the Greek OT). That is basically a systematic theological argument for the resurrection, inferred from a passage not directly designed to teach it. But a closer look at the passage he cited also yields a biblical theological argument for resurrection.

The issue in Jesus' citation of Exodus 3:6 is not merely afterlife. The Gospel writers spell out that the question revolved around what would happen "in the resurrection" (Matt 22:23; Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27). So how do God's words to Moses in Exodus 3:6 ("I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob") imply the bodily resurrection of the dead? The answer bears directly on the trustworthiness of God's words to the patriarchs.

Moses lived centuries after all three patriarchs had died; yet God still identified himself to Moses as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Why? What was his connection to them in the first place? God had bound himself to them by covenant promises including a land to be their own—promises not merely to their descendants, but to *them*.

I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty . . . . I have also established My covenant *with them*, to give *them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage*, in which they were strangers (Exod 6:3-4).<sup>62</sup>

The patriarchs lived as strangers and sojourners in Canaan only as "the land of promise" (Heb 11:9), and died without ever inheriting that land. What about God's promise? Was he lying? Did he fail? Did he really just mean "heaven"? Why would spirit beings need physical land, after all? How can God can be true to his words and give to *them* the land the he solemnly swore to them? The Bible's answer is the resurrection. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will inherit the land God promised them—literally and physically—in the resurrection.

Some interpreters come right up to the threshold of this conclusion, but stop short of the obvious implication regarding the land.

God is the eternal God of the covenant, a fact especially stressed wherever reference is made to the patriarchs. He always loves and blesses his people; therefore, it is inconceivable that his blessings cease when his people die (Carson 1984, 462).

But God didn't just promise them "blessings," he promised them a very specific piece of land, repeatedly. Another writes that "God will raise the dead because he cannot fail to keep his promises

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. also Gen 13:15; 15:7; 17:8; 26:3; 28:4, 13; 35:12; 50:24. All these passages specify that the land promise was not merely to the patriarchal seed, but to the patriarchs themselves.



to them that he will be their God” (Marshall 1978, 743). But he didn’t only promise to be their God, he promised them a land. Shouldn’t the fact that God “cannot fail to keep his promises” extend to *all* his promises to them, including the repeated and explicit promise of the land to the original patriarchs themselves? Brian Collins correctly makes this link.

God had told Abraham, “I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession” (Genesis 17:8). But Abraham never received this promise during his lifetime (Heb. 11:13). It is this truth that lies behind Jesus’ affirmation that Exodus 3:6 teaches the resurrection. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because he has covenanted with them . . . . He is not the God of the dead but of the living, because the patriarchs must be raised one day for the promises to them to be fulfilled (Collins 2011, 245).

He is “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” because of the covenant. That covenant entailed specific promises, one of which was that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would *themselves* possess the land that God himself defined with geographical specificity. He can give them more, but he cannot give them less, or other, than he promised. The issue ultimately transcends systematic theological disagreements. At its most basic level, this is about the trustworthiness of God’s words, and his ability not only to mean exactly what he says but to say exactly what he means.

## APPENDIX 1

## Comparison of Deuteronomy 30 and Ezekiel 36

Ezekiel 36	Deuteronomy 30
<p><sup>24</sup> "For I will <b>take</b> [לָקַח] you from among the nations, <b>gather</b> [קָבַץ] you out of all countries, and <b>bring</b> [בָּיֵא] you into your own land.</p> <p><sup>25</sup> "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.</p> <p><sup>26</sup> "I will give you a new <b>heart</b> and put a new spirit within you; I will take the <b>heart</b> of stone out of your flesh and give you a <b>heart</b> of flesh.</p> <p><sup>27</sup> "I will put My Spirit within you and <u>cause you to walk in My statutes</u>, and <u>you will obey My judgments and do them</u>.</p> <p><sup>28</sup> "Then you shall dwell in the <b>land</b> <u>that I gave to your fathers</u>; you shall be My people, and I will be your God. <sup>29</sup> "I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. I will call for the grain and <b>multiply</b> it, and bring no famine upon you.</p> <p><sup>30</sup> "And I will <b>multiply</b> the <b>fruit</b> of <u>your trees and the increase of your fields</u>, so that you need never again bear the reproach of famine among the nations."</p> <p>...</p> <p>37:21 ... "Surely I will <b>take</b> [לָקַח] the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and will <b>gather</b> [קָבַץ] them from every side and <b>bring</b> [בָּיֵא] them into their own land;</p>	<p><sup>4</sup> "If <i>any</i> of you are driven out to the farthest <i>parts</i> under heaven, from there the LORD your God will <b>gather</b> [קָבַץ] you, and from there he will <b>take</b> [לָקַח] you. <sup>5</sup> "Then the LORD your God will <b>bring</b> [בָּיֵא] you to the land ...</p> <p><sup>6</sup> "And <u>the LORD your God will circumcise your heart</u> and the <b>heart</b> of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your <b>heart</b> and with all your soul, that you may live.</p> <p><sup>8</sup> "And <u>you will again obey the voice of the LORD</u> and <u>do all his commandments</u> which I command you today.</p> <p><sup>5</sup> Then the LORD your God will bring you to <u>the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it</u>.</p> <p>He will prosper you and <b>multiply</b> you more than your fathers.</p> <p>...</p> <p><sup>9</sup> "The LORD your God will <u>make you abound in all the work of your hand</u>, in the <b>fruit</b> of your body, <u>in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your land for good</u>. For the LORD will again rejoice over you for good as he rejoiced over your fathers</p>

## APPENDIX 2

### Jeremiah 31:31-34 as Preamble: A Conceptual Parallel

The following text is cited from an online article (“The Preamble”) authored by two Constitutional scholars and Distinguished Professors of Law, Erwin Chemerinsky and Michael Stokes Paulsen.<sup>63</sup> *Italics* represent the authors’ original emphasis; **bold** reflects my emphasis for comparative purposes.

The Preamble of the U.S. Constitution—the document’s famous first **fifty-two words**—introduces everything that is to follow in the Constitution’s **seven articles** and **twenty-seven amendments**. It proclaims **who** is adopting this Constitution: “We the People of the United States.” It describes **why** it is being adopted—the purposes behind the enactment of America’s charter of government. And it describes **what** is being adopted: “*this Constitution*”—a single authoritative written text to serve as fundamental law of the land....

The word “preamble,” while accurate, does not quite capture the full importance of this provision. “Preamble” might be taken—we think wrongly—to imply that these words are merely an opening rhetorical flourish or frill without meaningful effect. To be sure, “preamble” usefully conveys the idea that this provision does not itself confer or delineate powers of government or rights of citizens. Those are set forth in the substantive articles and amendments that follow in the main body of the Constitution’s text. It was well understood at the time of enactment that **preambles in legal documents were not themselves substantive provisions and thus should not be read to contradict, expand, or contract the document’s substantive terms**.

**But that does not mean the Constitution’s Preamble lacks its own legal force.** Quite the contrary, it is the provision of the document that **declares the enactment of the provisions that follow**. Indeed, the Preamble has sometimes been termed the “Enacting Clause” of the Constitution, in that it declares the fact of adoption of the Constitution (once sufficient states had ratified it): “We the People of the United States . . . *do ordain and establish* this Constitution for the United States of America.”

I do not propose to make a precise correlation between the 18<sup>th</sup>-century U. S. Constitution and the 8<sup>th</sup>-century (B.C.!) new covenant introduced by God in Jeremiah 31. Nor am I proposing that Jeremiah 31:31-34 is a technical, formal preamble; that would require research into 8<sup>th</sup>-century ANE covenantal forms that is beyond the scope or purpose of this illustration. What I am suggesting is that the passage *functions* in a way that is similar to a preamble—a brief, introductory prologue to a much larger, detailed covenantal arrangement—and that to treat it as the whole, or even the sum and substance, of that larger body of covenantal material is to seriously misconstrue the nature and content of that covenant.<sup>64</sup> To that end, parallels in the rewrite below are suggestive and

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<sup>63</sup> <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/preamble/the-preamble-by-erwin-chemerinsky-and-michael-stokes-paulsen/interp/37>

<sup>64</sup> Allow me to anticipate a question in response to this statement: “Would you, then, accuse the author of Hebrews of ‘seriously misconstruing the nature and content of the new covenant’ since he cites only 31:31-34?” No, Hebrews 8 supports my point that the new covenant, while it has been inaugurated, has not been fully realized. Had he not stopped at 31:34 he could have laid the groundwork for a “less-than-literal” (to borrow Thielman’s words) interpretation of the new covenant. The fact that he cites only the “preamble’s” synopsis of the covenant’s soteriological components is theologically significant, in my opinion. As it is, he furnishes no basis for supposing that the Israel-specific provisions of the new covenant are less-than-literally fulfilled

conceptually helpful. Blue font represents the authors' original wording; black font represents my substitutions for the sake of comparison.

The Preamble of the New Covenant—the document's famous first **seventy-three** [Hebrew] **words**—introduces everything that is to follow in the Covenant's ten major passages and twenty-four provisions. It proclaims **who** is adopting this Covenant: "Behold the days are coming, *says the LORD, when I.*" It describes **why** it is being adopted: "*not like the covenant I made with your fathers . . . which covenant they broke.*" And it describes **what** is being adopted: "*a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah*"—a single authoritative written text to serve as fundamental law of the land.

The word "preamble," while accurate, does not quite capture the full importance of this provision. "Preamble" might be taken—we think wrongly—to imply that these words are merely an opening rhetorical flourish or frill without meaningful effect. To be sure, "preamble" usefully conveys the idea that this provision does not itself confer or delineate all the provisions of that covenant. Those are set forth in the substantive articles . . . that follow in the main body of the Covenant's text. It was well understood at the time of enactment that **preambles in legal documents . . . should not be read to contradict . . . or contract the covenant's substantive terms.**

**But that does not mean the Covenant's Preamble lacks its own legal force.** Quite the contrary, it is the provision of the document that **declares the enactment of the provisions that follow.** Indeed, the Preamble might be termed the "Enacting Clause" of the Covenant, in that it declares the fact of adoption of the Covenant: "I *will make* a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah."

It is true that Jeremiah 31:33-34 do begin to delineate some of the leading provisions of the covenant itself, but only by way of contrast to the former covenant ("**not like** the covenant that I made with your fathers . . . **but this** is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel") and only in the broadest of terms compared with the detailed provisions that emerge in this and the other new covenant texts.

To cite the Preamble to the Constitution as though it comprehensively expressed the sum and substance of the entire document would be a gross oversimplification and lead to interpretations never intended by the original authors. The authors' statement that "**preambles . . . should not be read to contradict . . . or contract the document's substantive terms**" is a telling observation. Similarly, theologians who routinely proof-text the new covenant with only Jeremiah 31:31-34, as though it comprehensively expresses the sum and substance of the entire covenant, risk profound oversimplification and reinforce misperceptions unintended by the original Author. In this case, Jeremiah 31:31-34 "**should not be read to contradict . . . or contract the covenant's substantive terms**" detailed in the rest of Jeremiah 31, 32, 33 and all the other new covenant passages. The best way to correct such misperceptions about the new covenant is to read its contents holistically.

The fact that Hebrews 8 cites only 31:31-34 does not prove that it represents the entire new covenant, but that it introduces the replacement of the old covenant and introduces the soteriological features of the new covenant (both major themes in the theology of Hebrews) operable in the NT era. What a NT writer does not quote is often (as here) as important (in terms of signaling fulfillment) as what he does quote.

## APPENDIX 3

### “ISRAEL-SPECIFIC”: AN ILLUSTRATION

Suppose I walk into my NT Theology class six weeks into the semester—long enough for them to begin to weary under the load of work I impose on them—and announce: “The day is coming, O my NT Theology class, when I will receive a large inheritance check. In that day, I will (1) give each of you \$1,000, (2) take all of you out to a nice restaurant for dinner, and (3) cancel any failing grades and award each of you an ‘A’ in NT Theology.” Naturally, they’re pretty excited.<sup>65</sup>

Then one day they start hearing rumors that I gave everyone in my Christology class \$1,000, and even took that class out to dinner—even though I never made any such promise to my Christology class. Have I been unrighteous to do what I did for my Christology class? No. Does that mean that I have fulfilled the promise I made? Clearly not, until I do for my NT Theology students everything I promised *them*. Suppose I give the NT Theology students \$1,000 each and a gift card to Ruth’s Chris Steak House—have I then fulfilled my promise? Again, no.

You could say the fulfillment has begun, that the promise has been inaugurated, but not fulfilled. It will not be finally fulfilled until the eschaton of the semester when I actually turn in an “A” for their final grade in NTT. But there’s one thing that I haven’t done—and *cannot* do—for the Christology students. I cannot give them an “A” in NTT because they’re not NTT students. That promise is “class-specific”; NTT students are the *only* ones for whom I can fulfill that particular promise. There’s simply no academically legitimate way I can give Christology students an “A” in NTT.<sup>66</sup>

The fact that the majority of the new covenant promises are Israel-specific means that they simply have no hermeneutically legitimate way of being applied to Gentiles. God never brought my ancestors out of Egypt and made a covenant with them (Jer 31:32), promised them a specific piece of real estate (Ezek 36:28), or divided them into two separate nations (Ezek 37:15-22). Yet all of these are part and parcel of the new covenant.

Here’s the larger point. The fact that the new covenant was made with Israel does not mean its benefits cannot be extended to others; God will be gracious to whom he will be gracious, and can extend his saving mercy to anyone he wants. But it does mean that what he promised must still be fulfilled as stated to those to whom it was made. At the heart of the trustworthiness of the new covenant is the trustworthiness of God not to mislead in the terms he uses, the reliability of his words as stated, and his ability to bring it to pass exactly what he promised as he promised it and to whom he promised it.

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<sup>65</sup> Note to students: This is purely hypothetical; don’t actually expect this in any of my classes. Ever.

<sup>66</sup> Obviously the analogy is neither exact nor exhaustive. The parallel to the new covenant would perhaps be closer if some of the NT Theology students had, say, received the cash while others had neglected to come by my office to pick it up (hard to imagine, I know, but then so is the rejection of a freely offered salvation).

## APPENDIX 4

### THE LAND PROMISE IN THE OT

Book	Reference
<b>Pentateuch</b>	
Genesis	12:7; 13:14-17; 15:7, 18; 15:8; 17:8; 24:7; 26:3; 28:4, 13; 35:12; 50:24
Exodus	6:8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; 32:13; 33:1
Numbers	11:12; 13:2; 14:23
Deuteronomy	1:8, 21, 35; 4:1; 6:3, 8, 10, 23; 7:13; 8:1; 9:5, 28; 10:11; 11:9, 21; 12:1; 19:8; 26:15; 27:3; 28:11; 30:5, 20; 31:7, 20; 34:2
<b>Historical Books</b>	
Joshua	1:6; 5:6; 18:3; 21:43; 23:5
Judges	2:1
1 Kings	8:34, 40, 48; 14:15; 21:8
2 Chronicles	6:25, 31; 20:7
Nehemiah	9:23, 36
<b>Prophetic Books</b>	
Jeremiah	3:18; 7:7; 11:5; 16:15; 24:10; 25:5; 30:3; 32:22; 35:15
Ezekiel	20:42; 36:28; 37:25; 47:14

Note: I employed multiple search parameters to locate over sixty references; but I am sure I have not found all of them.

## APPENDIX 5

### A SAMPLING OF COMMENTATORS ON ACTS 1:6

Many commentators are much harder on the disciples than Jesus was. In fact, many seem to be completely at odds with the disciples' obvious impressions and expectations. Oddly, Jesus doesn't seem to be. Here is a sampling of interpreters on the passage (you'll forgive my bracketed conversations with them from time to time).

[M]arvelous is their rudeness, that when as they had been diligently instructed for the space of three whole years, they betray no less ignorance than if they had never heard a word. There are as many errors in this question as there are words. [*Does Jesus' answer reflect this estimation?*] They ask him as concerning a kingdom; but they dream of an earthly kingdom, which should flow with riches, with dainties, with external peace, and with such like good things [*Like the one Isaiah 60 describes?*] (Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, loc. cit.).

The old prejudice, strange to say, came up on this hallowed occasion. . . . By restoring, they meant making Israel the triumphant and the ruling power, the imperial mistress of the world. This had been the brilliant dream of their ancestors for ages [*Multiple explicit prophecies from God are "dreams"?*], and it haunted them now (Thomas 1870, 8).

[T]here is a certain poignancy in their failure right to the end to understand that the kingdom was not of this world (cf. Jn. 18:36). [*This errs on two counts: Jesus' remark in John 18 refers not to the kingdom's nature or realm, but its origin, and it complains of an "error" that Jesus never addresses.*] It would be unjust to suggest that the apostles had learned nothing from Jesus. In some respects they had come a long way. But clearly they were wedded still to the popular notion [*Perhaps "prophetic" might be more accurate?*] of the kingdom of God as something political . . . . In this respect they had not progressed very far from their earlier hope of occupying the seats of power in such a kingdom [*Like the ones Jesus had promised them just weeks before?*] (Williams 2011, loc. cit.).

Their question is whether Jesus intends to restore the kingdom to Israel. [*Actually, their question is not whether, but when; and that's the question Jesus answers.*] This may reflect the Jewish hope that God would establish [a political kingdom]. If so, the disciples would appear here as representatives of those of Luke's readers who had not yet realized that Jesus had transformed the Jewish hope of the kingdom of God by purging it of its nationalistic political elements. [*If so, Luke did little to correct that notion in Jesus' answer.*] (Marshall 1980, 60).

Their question must have filled Jesus with dismay. [*Oddly, nothing in the text indicates that; and Jesus was not averse to expressing his dismay with the disciples, nor the NT writers with recording it.*] Were they still so lacking in perception? [*Jesus asked this very question of his disciples on matters of far less theological import; why are commentators the only ones to ask it here?*] . . . The verb, the noun, and the adverb of their sentence all betray doctrinal confusion about the kingdom. For the verb *restore* shows that they were expecting a political and territorial kingdom; the noun *Israel* that they were expecting a national kingdom; and the adverbial clause *at this time* that they were expecting its immediate establishment. [*He has at least interpreted the import of their question perfectly.*] In his reply (7-8) Jesus corrected their mistaken notions of the kingdom's nature, extent, and arrival (Stott 1990, 41).

## APPENDIX 6

### ROMANS 11: WHO OR WHAT IS THE “ROOT”?

Jews who confess Jesus as their Messiah are joined into one body with believing Gentiles in the Church. That doesn't mean that they cease being Jews any more than my conversion eradicated my being a Gentile (Scottish on my father's side, German on my mother's). What does Paul mean, then, when he teaches that Gentiles are “grafted in”? Grafted into what?

A surface reading of Romans 11 can give the impression that Gentiles are grafted into Israel. A close reading of the whole chapter, however, clarifies that that's not what Paul is teaching.

And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you (Rom 11:17-18).

The question is, what exactly is the olive tree (or, more precisely, the “root”) from which unbelieving Jews have been severed and into which Gentiles are grafted by faith? The major interpretations take it to represent either (a) Abraham, or (b) the Patriarchs, (c) Jewish Christians, or (d) Christ. I'd like to suggest a slightly more nuanced referent rooted (!) in Paul's own language: the tree is the soteriological people of God and the root is “the election of grace” (11:5) embodied in the Abrahamic Covenant. God's graciously chose Abraham and his seed (i.e., Jews) not only as the recipient of his unique blessing but also as the channel of his universal blessing to “all the families of the earth” (i.e., Gentiles). This understanding seems to me to emerge most naturally from a holistic, contextual reading of Paul's larger argument in Paul's own terms.

Paul reminds the Romans Christians, “you do not support [βαστάζω] the root but the root supports you” (11:18). But it is not the patriarchs themselves or even Abraham that bear and nourish the Gentile Christians. It is “the election of grace” embodied in the covenant promise to Abraham, realized and extended to the Gentiles via the new covenant. Likewise in 11:28, Israel is beloved “for the fathers' sake” not in themselves (cf. Ezek 36:22, 32) but because of God's loyalty to his gracious choice of them and to the covenant promises made to them and, through them, to “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3).

Moreover, it's clear that *faith* is the determining factor in whether one is grafted into or broken off from this root (Rom 11:20, 23). So Paul is not teaching that believing Gentiles are grafted into Israel, Abraham, the Patriarchs, or even (in this passage) Christ. Jews either remain in or are broken off from God's gracious choice embodied in the Abrahamic Covenant based on their belief (or not) in the Mediator of those covenant blessings. Likewise, Gentiles are grafted into God's gracious choice to become part of the soteriological people of God when they, too, embrace Christ by faith.



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