

THE NEW COVENANT IN OTHER PROPHETS

Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah, but he spoke to those already in exile. His words in chapter 36 are similar: God will judge Israel and disperse them among the nations, but for his own sake God will bring honor to his name among the nations by regathering Israel to its land, cleansing the people, giving them a new heart, and putting his Spirit in them so that they will keep God's laws. He will bless their obedience with abundant prosperity so that the land becomes like the Garden of Eden. The term "new covenant" is not used but the description matches what Moses and Jeremiah predicted.

As is clear from Deut, Jer, and Ezekiel, the restoration of God's people so that they can fulfill his law and be blessed abundantly depends upon a transformed heart. Though it is not always explicitly mentioned, every passage that describes God's delight in his people and his glory being put on display to all the nations presumes the existence of the New Covenant (e.g., Isa 54–55; 60–62; Zeph 3:14–20; Hag 2:19; Zech 8–14; Mal 3–4).

THE NEW COVENANT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Covenant is addressed by Jesus, Paul, and Hebrews without any explanation or redefinition. It is to be assumed that they were speaking about the New Covenant as described in the OT. Any interpretation which ignores or denies God's promises in the OT is to be rejected.

THE SEED OF ABRAHAM AND SON OF DAVID FULFILLS THE OLD (MOsaIC) COVENANT AND ESTABLISHES THE NEW COVENANT

The New Covenant replaces the Mosaic Covenant and is the means by which God fulfills his promises made to Abraham and David. The New Testament will clearly reveal that it is the awaited son of David who will make possible the forgiveness promised in the New Covenant by offering himself as the sacrifice for the people's sin. Having given his life for the nation, he will be the ideal ruler to shepherd God's people. Jesus thus enables (and becomes) God's fulfillment of all of the covenants.

GOING FURTHER

Are God's promises in the New Covenant being fulfilled today?

PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT STUDY

Read Ezra 9–10, Neh 13, Esther 8–9, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Consider: were God's promises to Israel fulfilled upon the return from exile? Why not? What's next?

THE NEW COVENANT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

PREPARATION FOR THIS STUDY

Read Jer 30–33 and think carefully about what the New Covenant is and is not. Do not allow the NT to influence your thinking at this point.

THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

To understand the "New" Covenant, one must understand the covenants that came before. In the Abrahamic Covenant, the Lord outlined a plan in which he would bless the world through one man and his seed living in the land God gave to them. Abraham believed God would do what he said and his faith was credited to him as righteousness (Gen 12, 15, 17).

THE MOsaIC COVENANT

God redeemed Abraham's seed from slavery in Egypt and brought the nation to Mount Sinai where they entered a covenant relationship. God promised that if the Israelites obeyed his commandments, they would be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The Mosaic covenant was essentially an *administrative* covenant by which God would fulfill the Abrahamic covenant. That is, God would do what he said in the Abrahamic covenant (bless, multiply, and give land) through the mechanism of the Mosaic Covenant. Israel would inhabit the land if they were obedient, they would have numerous descendants if they followed God's law, and they would bless the on-looking world who would marvel at a people who had a God so near.

THE NEED FOR A NEW COVENANT

Moses knew before he died that the Mosaic Covenant was "old." He knew that it could not last, not because God's law was faulty but because the hearts of the people were sinful. Moses explains this in Deut 29–30, predicting that the people will abandon the covenant and experience the curses of the covenant. When the nations come and ask why Israel has become like Sodom and Gomorrah, they will be told, "It is because this people abandoned the covenant of the LORD . . . They went off and worshiped other gods and bowed down to them . . . Therefore the LORD's anger burned against this land, so that he brought on it all the curses written in this book. . . and in great wrath the LORD uprooted them from their land" (Deut 29:25–28).

Moses knew this will happen, writing “when” (not “if”): “*When* all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, and *when* you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart . . . , *then* the LORD . . . will restore your fortunes” (Deut 30:1-3).

Moses describes what God will do at this time: (1) He will bring the Israelites back, even from the most distant land; (2) He will again give Israel the land promised to Abraham; (3) He will make the Israelites more prosperous and numerous than their fathers; (4) He will circumcise their hearts “so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live”; (5) He will curse those who curse Israel; and (6) He will bless the people (Deut 30:4-10).

THE CIRCUMCISED HEART IN THE MOSAIC COVENANT

The Lord commanded the Israelites to “circumcise your hearts and do not be stiff-necked any longer” (Deut 10:16). The Israelites entered the Abrahamic covenant by physical circumcision; by this cutting of the flesh, the newborn became part of God’s people. But one could be circumcised and yet despise God and his promises (e.g., Ishmael and Esau). Another circumcision was necessary, and the Lord commanded that each person be *spiritually* circumcised. The physical removal of the foreskin symbolized the need to remove the stony, stubborn exterior of the heart. The Mosaic Covenant *commanded* circumcision of the heart, but it did not provide it automatically. As a result, some Israelites would not have regenerated hearts and they would not be able to keep God’s law. Thus the covenant would be broken and the people exiled. Moses predicts the day when “the LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants” (Deut 30:6).

THE CONTEXT OF JEREMIAH

The books of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah are “bookends” to the history of the nation of Israel. Deuteronomy commands obedience and Jeremiah shows how the nation failed to obey and would be exiled. The book of Jeremiah is primarily about the Old Covenant and how God was faithful to punish the people just as Moses had predicted in Deut 29.

THE NEW COVENANT IN JEREMIAH

But Jeremiah also knew of the promise of transformation in Deut 30, and in the so-called “Book of the Consolation” (Jer 30–33) he expanded on these predictions:

1. The Lord will restore Israel from captivity (30:1-4).
2. The Lord will deliver Israel to serve the Lord and David their king (30:5-11).
3. Israel’s incurable wound requires punishment, but the Lord will cure the wound (30:12-17).
4. The Lord will restore the relationship with his people (30:18-24).
5. The Lord will show tender compassion to his people (31:1-6).
6. The Lord will bring the remnant back from the ends of the earth to enjoy their land (31:7-14).
7. The Lord assures his people that there is hope for the future (31:15-22).
8. The Lord will plant his people in their land (31:23-30).
9. The Lord will make a new covenant with his people (31:31-34).
10. The Lord guarantees Israel’s future as long as the sun rises (31:35-37).
11. Jerusalem will be restored and never again destroyed (31:38-40).

One of the features of the restoration is the New Covenant (#9 above). This New Covenant is given in a context of the restoration and blessing of Israel. The features of the New Covenant include:

1. The Parties: The house of Israel and the house of Judah (v31)
2. Distinct: It will not be like the Mosaic Covenant which Israel broke (v32)
3. Internal Law: The law will be written on their hearts (v33a)
4. Faithfulness: They will be God’s people (v33b)
5. Knowledge of the Lord: They will all know God (v34a)
6. Forgiveness: The Lord will forgive their wickedness (v34b)
7. Preservation: The Lord will surely protect Israel forever (vv35-37)
8. Physical Context: These blessings will be realized in the same city once destroyed (vv38-40). God commands Jeremiah to purchase a plot of land as evidence that they will return to this same place (ch. 32).

These promises are summarized in 32:37-41 where God promises to hand the Israelites over to Babylon but also to bring them back to the land of Israel where he will give them singleness of heart so that they will always fear God. God will make an everlasting covenant with them and never stop doing good to them. In chapter 33, the Lord declares that he will heal the people and the land so that Jerusalem “will bring me renown, joy, praise and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it” (33:9). The Lord will send a righteous king from the house of David and the Lord will be the people’s righteousness (33:15-16). Just as the rainbow is a visible sign of God’s promise not to destroy the earth, so the shining of the sun, moon and stars is a visible sign that God has not rejected his people (31:35-37; 33:25-26).