

Millennial Series:Part 18: The New Covenant with Israel

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Among the Biblical covenants of the Old Testament, the new covenant with Israel takes its place in importance with the Abrahamic and the Davidic covenants as determining the course and destiny of the nation Israel. In the study of premillennialism it is another important evidence for a future millennial kingdom in which its promises can find literal fulfillment.

The Promises of the New Covenant with Israel

The promises of the new covenant with Israel are among the most specific of the Scriptures. The major passage is found in Jeremiah 31:31-34: "Behold, the days come, saith Jehovah, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was a husband unto them, saith Jehovah. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith Jehovah: I will put my law in their inward parts, and in their heart will I write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know Jehovah; for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith Jehovah: for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more" (A.S.V.).

The Problems of Interpretation

Postmillennial Interpretation. Three principal interpretations are found of this strategic Scripture corresponding to the postmillennial, amillennial, and premillennial interpretations. The view of Charles Hodge may be taken as representative of the postmillennial view, which is now discarded almost completely, though its optimism is preserved somewhat in modern liberalism. While abiding with the literal concept of the word *Israel*, Hodge finds the fulfillment of the promise in the later part of the interadvent age in blessing on Jews who believe in Christ. To put it in different words, he believed the new covenant would be fulfilled to Israel in the millennium or golden age just preceding the second advent.¹

Amillennial Interpretation. A second interpretation characterizes the amillennial view as illustrated in the recent writings of Oswald T. Allis which express the sentiment of a considerable element of Reformed theology since Calvin. He identifies Israel with the church and transfers the promises of the new covenant to believers in Christ in this dispensation, both Jews and Gentiles. Allis states, "For the gospel age in which we are living is that day foretold by the prophets when the law of God shall be written in the hearts of men (Jer xxxi.33) and when the Spirit of God abiding in their hearts will enable them to keep it (Ezek xi.19 , xxxvi.26f)."² This view differs from the position of Hodge in that it is a denial that the promises refer to Israel nationally and transfers them entirely to believers of this age.

Premillennial Interpretation. In contrast to the postmillennial and amillennial views, the premillennial position is that the new covenant is with Israel and the fulfillment in the millennial kingdom after the Second coming of Christ. Minor variations are found in the premillennial view of the new covenant based largely on the further light given in the New Testament. The premillennial view popularized by the *Scofield Reference Bible*³ regards the new covenant as having a twofold application, first to Israel fulfilled in the millennium, and, second, to the church in the present age. A better position is taken by Lewis Sperry Chafer who believes the new covenant in the Old Testament will be fulfilled only in the millennium, but finds also another new covenant revealed in the New Testament which has reference to the church in the present age. This conceives the sacrifice of Christ as making possible two covenants, a new covenant for Israel as well as a new covenant for the church.⁴ This view has the advantage of not complicating the promises given expressly to Israel with promises given to the church.

A third position, also premillennial, was advocated by J. N. Darby who held that the new covenant belonged to Israel alone in both Old and New Testaments though the church participates in the benefits of the sacrifice of Christ. He writes, “We enjoy indeed all the essential privileges of the new covenant, its foundation being laid on God’s part in the blood of Christ, but we do so in spirit, not according to the letter.”⁵ Darby holds that “the gospel is not a covenant, but the revelation of the salvation of God.”⁶

The premillennial view, though varying in details in the interpretation of the new covenant, insists that the new covenant as revealed in the Old Testament concerns Israel and requires fulfillment in the millennial kingdom. This is substantiated by a study of the contents of the covenant.

The Provisions of the New Covenant

According to Jeremiah 31:31-34, previously quoted, at least seven aspects are found contained in the new covenant with Israel.

(1) It is specifically a covenant with “the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.” This was certainly understood by the Jews living in the Old Testament period as referring to Israel. The church and to restrict the passage to a spiritualized fulfillment of the details of the covenant robs the covenant of its essential features. The facts are not only stated closely in Jeremiah 31 and intended to be taken literally, but similar passages elsewhere have the same features.

Isaiah 61:8-9 declares that the covenant is everlasting and especially designed to reveal to all observers that God has blessed the seed of Israel. The context is the same as in Jeremiah—the covenant will be fulfilled following a period of trial and judgment and preceded by the regathering of Israel. Jeremiah repeats the same promises in Jeremiah 32:37-40 where again the everlasting character of the covenant and its relation to Israel’s regathering are reiterated.

Ezekiel 37:21-28 adds further confirmation: (1) Israel to be regathered; (2) Israel to be one nation, ruled by one king; (3) Israel no longer to be idolatrous, to be cleansed, forgiven; (4) Israel to dwell “forever” in the land after regathering; (5) the covenant of peace with them to be everlasting; (6) God’s tabernacle to be with them, i.e., He will be present with them in a visible way; (7) Israel to be known among Gentiles as a nation blessed of God. All of these promises are implicit in the basic passage of Jeremiah, but they confirm, enrich, and enlarge the covenant.

The present age of grace does not fulfill these provisions in many particulars. The events preceding the fulfillment have not taken place. Israel as a nation is not regathered, though many have returned to Palestine in our day. The great tribulation or the time of Jacob’s trouble is yet future. It is therefore impossible for the new covenant with Israel to be realized now. Israel today is not publicly recognized as God’s people, indeed, they do not claim any special privilege themselves. Certainly Israel as a nation is not being blessed of God in spiritual ways. Most obvious too is the fact that all do not know the Lord, making missionary effort or personal witness unnecessary. All do not know the Lord, and our neighbors still need to know Him. This is an age of missionary effort in contrast to the prophesied situation under which the new covenant will operate. Israel today is not being ruled by one king. God is not tabernacling with Israel now. All of these plain statements have to be ignored or spiritualized to avoid the premillennial teaching that the new covenant is designed for millennial conditions.

If taken in their ordinary literal sense, the promises of the new covenant as contained in Old Testament prophecy correspond precisely to the premillennial interpretation. Amillenarians have indirectly admitted this, first, by acknowledging that “Jewish” interpretation anticipated an earthly, literal reign of the Messiah in which the covenant would be fulfilled. It is their contention that the Jewish expectation was an error. Second, amillenarians indirectly admit the force of the premillennial argument by consistently avoiding exegesis of the precise promises given. The promises are usually grouped in a broad generality of promised spiritual blessing and appropriated by the device of making Israel mean the church or body of believers. Third, amillenarians have turned for the most part from exegesis of the new covenant in the Old Testament to supposed confirmation of their view in the New Testament. A recent illustration of this is the work of Allis.⁷ While he refers to it and

identifies it with the grace extended to the church in the present age, he nowhere in his extensive treatment of premillennialism attempts to give a reasonable exegesis of the passage and explain the particulars of the covenant. It is safe to say that this is an impossibility without spiritualization of its provisions. The Old Testament taken alone would never have suggested the spiritualized interpretation adopted by the amillenarians. The question remains, What does the New Testament teach?

General Teaching of the New Testament on the New Covenant

The term *new covenant*, *καινή διαθήκη*, is used only five times in the best texts of the New Testament (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8; 9:15). Other references to the new covenant without the precise designation include at least seven more instances (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Rom 11:27; Heb 8:10; 8:13 ; 10:16 ; 12:24). The references in the Gospels obviously refer to the new covenant as stated in Luke and also in some texts of Matthew and Mark. The context makes the reference clear in the other instances. Of special interest is Hebrews 12:24 where the expression *διαθήκη νέα* is used for the new covenant—new in the sense of recent, the only such instance in the New Testament.

Of the five direct references to a new covenant, only one (Heb 8:8) is connected by the context directly with the new covenant of Jeremiah. While this does not solve the problem, as will be seen later, it certainly narrows the area of direct revelation. Of the auxiliary texts judged referring to the new covenant, Romans 11:27; Hebrews 8:10, 13, and 10:16 seem to have reference to the new covenant with Israel. The other references at least are not specific.

The general teaching of New Testament passages bearing upon the New Covenant is that the new covenant has been made possible by the sacrifice of Christ. Attention is drawn to this central aspect in passages dealing with the Lord's Supper (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). Other passages enlarge on the grace of God and forgiveness of sins made possible by the death of Christ (Rom 11:27; Heb 8:8-13; 10:16-18). Christ is declared to be the Mediator of the new covenant (Heb 12:24). Whether the church of the present age or Israel is in view, the new covenant provides a basis in grace for forgiveness and blessing secured by the blood of Jesus Christ. On this all conservative theologians agree whether premillennial, amillennial, or postmillennial. The difference in point of view is occasioned by the question of whether the new covenant promised Israel is being fulfilled now, in the present interadvent age, as the amillenarians contend, or whether Israel's new covenant will be fulfilled after the second coming of Christ in the millennial kingdom, as the premillennarians contend. Most premillennarians (Darby excepted) would agree that a new covenant has been provided for the church, but not the new covenant for Israel. The question resolves itself into one of exegesis of the principal passages.

The New Covenant for Israel in the New Testament

Eliminating for the time being references to the new covenant in relation to the Lord's Supper, which are not determinative in the present argument, what do the other passages of the New Testament teach? Romans 11:27 refers to the covenant as taking away sin from Israel. The context is illuminating. The time for the fulfillment of this covenant is stated in the preceding verse as being when the Deliverer shall come out of Zion. This is clearly identified with the second coming of Christ, the time when "all Israel shall be saved" (Rom 11:25). According to this passage the new covenant will have its fulfillment as a result of the second advent. This, of course, is precisely what the premillennarian believes and is absolutely contrary to the thought that the new covenant is in force for Israel now. The explicit teaching of this passage confirms the premillennial view.

Amillenarians find it convenient to ignore Romans 11:27. Wyngaarden, who has written extensively on the new covenant covering almost every Scripture reference, omits Romans 11:27 completely in his discussion in the *Calvin Forum* on "The New Covenant in Biblical Theology."⁸ In his book, *The Future of the Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfillment*, which on the whole is one of the best amillennial works on the subject, again there is no consideration whatever of the connection of the fulfillment of the new covenant with the second advent, and only one reference of any character at all to this verse.⁹

Oswald Allis, while discussing Romans 11:25-26, does not even mention Romans 11:27 in his entire work in defense of amillenarianism.¹⁰ This illustrates a tendency in amillennial literature to avoid Scriptures which support the premillennial view.

Both Allis and Wyngaarden, however, devote considerable attention to the reference in Hebrews 8, and consider it an unanswerable argument in favor of their interpretation. It is, in fact, the only passage which provides any difficulty to the premillennial view, and this difficulty vanishes if the passage is carefully studied. The argument of Hebrews 8 reveals the truth that Christ is the Mediator of a better covenant than Moses, established upon better promises (Heb 8:6). The argument hangs on the point that the Mosaic covenant was not faultless—was never intended to be an everlasting covenant (Heb 8:7). In confirmation of this point, the new covenant of Jeremiah is cited at length, proving that the Old Testament itself anticipated the end of the Mosaic law in that a new covenant is predicted to supplant it. The writer of Hebrews singles out of the entire quotation, the one word *new* and argues that this would automatically make the Mosaic covenant old (Heb 8:13). A further statement is made that the old covenant is “becoming old” and “is nigh unto vanishing away.” It should be noted that nowhere in this passage is the new covenant with Israel declared to be in force. The only argument is that which was always true—the prediction of a new covenant automatically declares the Mosaic covenant as a temporary, not an everlasting covenant.

Amillenarians, however, completely ignore the silence of the passage on the very point they are trying to prove. Allis writes enthusiastically: “The passage speaks of the new covenant. It declares that this new covenant has been already introduced and that by virtue of the fact that it is called ‘new’ it has made the one which it is replacing ‘old,’ and that the old is about to vanish away. It would be hard to find a clearer reference to the gospel age in the Old Testament than in these verses in Jeremiah.”¹¹

While Allis has done all he could to claim this passage in support of his amillennial position, he has also indicated the fallacy of the amillennial argument by flagrantly begging the question. He states that the passage “declares that this new covenant has been already introduced.”¹² A careful reading of the passage will reveal it makes no such statement. It declares a “better covenant” than the Mosaic covenant has been introduced (Heb 8:6), but it does not state here or anywhere else that this better covenant is “the new covenant with the house of Israel,” or that Israel’s new covenant has been introduced. Allis not only reads in statements which are not to be found in this passage, but also ignores the argument of the writer of Hebrews. The argument does not depend upon the introduction of the new covenant for Israel, but only on the question of whether the Old Testament anticipates an end to the Mosaic covenant. The fact that the Old Testament predicts a new covenant for Israel establishes this point.

It should be further noted that if the writer had intended to argue that the provisions of the new covenant were already in force, he would certainly have used the various aspects of the new covenant as quoted. Instead, no use whatever is made of the details of the covenant except for the one word *new*. It would have been a crushing argument to contenders for the law of Moses if, in fact, the new covenant was already in force and its prophecy fulfilled. This would have ended the argument quickly. Instead, the writer contends merely for the superiority of the Christian order as superseding the Mosaic covenant. The new covenant in force in the present age is not claimed to fulfill the new covenant with Israel at all.

While amillenarians are usually content to argue from Hebrews 8, another passage of the same character is found in Hebrews 10:16-17 (which Allis does not even mention). Here the argument hangs upon the essential grace character of the new covenant with Israel, which is again quoted in part. The point is made that the new covenant with Israel not only anticipated the abrogation of the law but also the end of Mosaic sacrifices as a basis for forgiveness. In that God promises to remember their sins no more, it requires a sacrifice for sin which does not need to be repeated. All agree that the death of Christ provides the gracious basis both for the new covenant with the church and the new covenant with Israel. The death of Christ has ushered in a day of grace enjoyed now by every believer, and to be enjoyed by the nation Israel in the millennial kingdom also.

Further light is cast on the problem in the unusual reference in Hebrews 12:24 where *new* is the translation of the *véa* meaning *recent*. Jesus is declared to be the Mediator of the new covenant in the sense of a *recent* covenant. The time element is in contrast to the old covenant, i.e., the Mosaic, which has been in force for many

centuries. Reference is apparently to the covenant with the church and not to Israel's new covenant. Hebrews 9:15 likewise declares that Christ is the Mediator "of a new covenant," which is true, of course, both for a covenant with the church or a covenant with Israel.

The New Covenant with Believers of This Age

Premillennarians are in agreement that the new covenant with Israel awaits its complete fulfillment in the millennial kingdom. However, there exists some difference of opinion how the new covenant relates to the present interadvent age. Particular attention is paid to Luke 22:20 and the parallel synoptic passages (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24) where the disciples are introduced to the Lord's Supper and informed that the cup represents the blood of the new covenant. Some premillennarians like Darby¹³ believe the church is related only to the *blood* of the new covenant—the gracious ground of the new covenant, rather than the new covenant itself. It is true, of course, that the Old Testament covenants in general belonged to Israel, as brought out in Romans 9:4 (cf. Eph 2:12). Scofield, however, regards the new covenant with Israel as having an oblique reference to the believers of this age, though concerned primarily with Israel.¹⁴ Preference was stated earlier in this study for another view advanced by Lewis Sperry Chafer¹⁵ advocating two new covenants, one for the nation Israel to be fulfilled in the millennium, the other for the church to be fulfilled in the present age. The point of view that holds to two covenants has certain advantages. It provides a sensible reason for establishing the Lord's Supper for believers in this age in commemoration of the blood of the new covenant. The language of 1 Corinthians 11:25 seems to require it: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood: this do, as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of me." It hardly seems reasonable to expect Christians to distinguish between the cup and the new covenant when these appear to be identified in this passage. In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul speaking of himself states, "Our sufficiency is of God: who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant." It would be difficult to adjust the ministry of Paul as a minister of the new covenant if, in fact, there is no new covenant for the present age. Even Darby, who seems to have originated this idea, states, "We enjoy indeed all the essential privileges of the new covenant, its foundation being laid on God's part in the blood of Christ, but we do so in spirit, not according to the letter."¹⁶ It can be seen that this is not far from Scofield's idea of a double application. The issues of premillennialism have been focused with increasing sharpness in recent years until the line has been drawn between Israel's promises and those belonging to the church. The concept of two new covenants is a better analysis of the problem and more consistent with premillennialism as a whole. The amillennial argument breaks down, however, not on the basis of these finer distinctions but the obvious failure in the present age of any literal fulfillment of the covenant with Israel. As in other particulars of prophecy concerning the millennium, a literal fulfillment demands a future millennial dispensation.

Conclusion

The conclusions drawn from this study of the new covenant, while only a partial analysis of the covenant itself, point to future fulfillment of Jeremiah's covenant. The key texts such as Hebrews 8, upon which the amillennial theory bases most of its argument, upon analysis fail to provide any proof for its contentions. Further, such passages as Romans 11:27 in the New Testament predict fulfillment of the new covenant as an outgrowth of the second advent, not the first coming of Christ, and therefore awaiting the return of Christ to establish His kingdom on earth. As in other areas of the millennial doctrine, the argument hangs upon the question of literal interpretation. Only by spiritualizing the promises and ignoring contradictory Scripture can the amillennial concept of the new covenant be sustained.

Dallas, Texas

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¹ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1909), p. 589.

² Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1945), p. 42.

³ *Scofield Reference Bible*, pp. 1297-98, note.

⁴ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), IV, 325.

⁵ J. N. Darby, *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, William Kelly, editor (London: G. Morrish, *n.d.*) Doctrinal, I, 286.

⁶ *Loc. cit.*

⁷ Allis, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁸ Martin J. Wyngaarden, "The New Covenant in Biblical Theology," *The Calvin Forum*, XI (May, 1946), 208-12.

⁹ Martin J. Wyngaarden, *The Future of the Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfillment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1934), p. 188.

¹⁰ Allis, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Allis, *ibid.*, p. 154.

¹² *Loc. cit.*

¹³ Darby, *loc. cit.*

¹⁴ *Scofield Reference Bible, loc. cit.*

¹⁵ Chafer, *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ {Footnote particulars missing in original printed edition}