

Jeremiah 31:31-34 - ברית חדשה

“Lo! The age is coming,” affirms YHWH, “when I will cut (*kah-rote*) with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah a fresh covenant (*beh-reet heh-dah-shaw*). It will not be like the covenant that I made with their fathers—in the time when I took their hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke and I ruled (*ba’awl*) over them.”—*affirms YHWH*.

“For such is the covenant that I make, with the house of Israel, after that age,” affirms YHWH, “I will give my Teaching (*Torah*) in their inward parts (*ke-rev*) and into their heart I do etch it deep. I will become to them their God (*Elohyim*) as they are to me for a people. And they will not teach any more, each to their neighbour and each with their friend, saying, ‘Heed YHWH!’ For they all shall know (*yah-dah*) me, from their least unto their greatest,” affirms YHWH.

“For I pardon their iniquity, And of their sin I speak of no more.”

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- **Berit (ברית):** “covenant”. An agreement between individuals or groups, often between a superior and inferior party. In the Bible it is most often used for various agreements made between God and his people, his priests, or leaders such as David.
 - **Karot (כרת):** “cut”. Covenant is created through “cutting”, whether inscribing words in stone or to cutting the bodies of sacrifices in a ritual. The verb also describes the meaningful and non-reversible division of a whole: to cut down a sacred tree, cut off foreskin, tear a garment, or destroy a human. Implication: death is necessary for a new/fresh re-creation.
 - **Kerev (קרוב):** “inward part”. Entrails of sacrificial animals, the stomach/bowels, or the inner person/self/heart. The verb means “drawing near”, as people or priests coming to sacrifice. It is used of the “inward part of man; as [the] seat of thought and emotion”, where God places wisdom within Solomon.
 - **Ba’al (בעל):** “ruled over.” To *ba’al* someone is to be their master, sometimes a woman’s husband. It implies a superior who controls an inferior: “lord, ruler, commander, owner, possessor.” Not a relationship of equals, or of freedom and obedience coming from inner joy and love, but one of outer domination and obligation. Compare to false Canaanite god Baal.
 - **Yada (ידע):** “know” (as Yoda does). A common word in the Bible, to “realize, be aware, have knowledge (of)” an object is the primary definition. Beyond intellectual knowledge alone to include general experience and relationship (also a euphemism for sexual relations). It can have an intimate and familial extent which contrasts with the one-way connection above.

“Is the Hebrew Law, the original Covenant, an impossible burden?”

“Surely, this Teaching (*Torah*) which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, ‘Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?’ No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it. — *Deuteronomy 30:11-14 (YLT)*

“What is the Law for? Is it about making God happy, or is it for our benefit?”

“See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity.

“For I command you this day, to love YHWH your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His laws, and His rules, *that you may thrive and increase*, and that YHWH your God may bless you in the land that you are about to enter and possess.

“But if your heart turns away and you give no heed, and are lured into the worship and service of other gods, I declare to you this day that you shall certainly perish; you shall not long endure on the soil that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: *I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life*—if you and your offspring would live— by loving YHWH your God, heeding His commands, and holding fast to Him. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the soil that YHWH swore to your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give to them.” — *Deuteronomy 30:15-20*

Is the Law about outward obedience, or inward heart transformation?

“And I have given to them [those exiles reassembled as Israel] one heart, and a fresh spirit I do give in your midst. And I have taken the *heart of stone* out of their body, and I have given to them a *heart of flesh*. So that in my principles they walk, and my judgments they keep, and have done them. And they have been to me for a people, and I am to them for God.” — *Ezekiel 11:19-20*

Notes from the *Jewish Study Bible*:

The 'new covenant' has been interpreted by Christians as a prophecy of the new covenant through Jesus (New Testament means new covenant), but here it refers to the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian exile and the reconstruction of the Temple. According to this passage, it is not the *content* of the new covenant which will be different, but how it is *learned*.

God places the 'Teaching,' i.e., the Torah, in the 'inmost being' or heart of the people so that the covenant cannot be broken again. This idea is developed in later Lurianic *kabbalah*, which maintains that all persons have a divine spark within. Since it is so inscribed, there will be no need for the Torah to be taught.

Commentary (excerpted from John Lein's exegesis paper from last year):

The book overall is concentrated primarily on the negative theme of "plucking up and tearing down" that is announced in the beginning, the dismantling of Israel that takes place in the exile. However, Jeremiah also points to the work of "building and planting", and our passage is located within a section devoted to that minority voice of restoration called "The Book of Comfort" in chapters 30-31. This block may have been a separate composition placed into the larger text or brought together into a cohesive message in an editing process from other locations. Possibly added after delivery during the festival of booths (sukoth) in the fall of 587 BCE only months after the Babylonian exile occurred.

In the verses immediately before our passage, the six key verbs from the introduction of the book are repeated as if to return focus to the planting and building. The stage is set: *restoration is coming*. The new generation does not have to be trapped in the consequences of the past because something new is at hand.

In this passage Jeremiah describes the promise of a new way of being and relating, not simply a rephrased covenant of the same type. This new covenant differs from the old in causal force, in source of energy, and in very being itself. Here love is embedded rather than obedience imposed. There is a mutual relationship of equals rather than hierarchical, and all is created through the power of forgiveness.

The progression is clear in the passage. Ba'al speaks of the prior dominating relationship between God and his people as a sign of failure in the covenant. The application in our passage comes in verse 34. First God describes the ideal state of the people as knowing God intimately without instruction, and then gives the reason that this will come about: because he will forgive their sins and remember them no more. Forgiveness is the *cause* of internalized and relational knowing.

The former Episcopal priest and eccentric scholar of religion Alan Watts spoke on this theme as recorded in a recent book . He describes the movement of religion, as he terms it, from a magic phase to moral phase ("mercy not sacrifice") as a step forward. He says, "At this level the teacher of religion becomes primarily the prophetic teacher of morals, but unfortunately you cannot love out of aridity....[and] the moral preachings are given to people who are perfectly incapable of observing them." Instead we must continue on to a religion of relationship, to become connected with the transforming power of the divine on a level beyond intellectual knowledge or experiential practice of ritual.

In this way Jeremiah's new covenant speaks of hope for a transformed religious community of his time as well as existing as a hope for each of us in our lives. That once we have been formed within good, moral systems of tradition and yet fail to become the people we yearn to be, we may come to know God on the intimate level which moves from the inside out rather than outside in. This is not something which we can attain in our own striving as Thomas Merton learns from both Chuang Tzu and St. Paul, but comes only as we allow the unearned forgiveness of God into our inward parts. Post-modern philosopher Peter Rollins also reflects on this theme in showing the psychological truth of this revelation: it is only once we allow ourselves to accept grace that we can transform.

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- Watts, Alan. *Still the Mind: An Introduction to Meditation*.