

SYDNEY COLLEGE OF DIVINITY

**A NEW COVENANT**

AN ASSIGNMENT SUBMITTED TO  
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE CLASS REQUIREMENTS OF  
BB412 STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT  
AS PART OF AN M.A. PROGRAMME

BROKEN BAY INSTITUTE  
(A Member Institute of the Sydney College of Divinity)

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BRISBANE, QUEENSLAND  
JUNE 6, 2008

## BB412 – Studies in the Old Testament

## Assignment #2

**A New Covenant**

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.<sup>1</sup>

This paper first discusses the content and message of Jeremiah 31:31-34. It then shows what elements of the covenant are given emphasis and what aspects of the God of the covenant are revealed in the text.

**Content**

Jeremiah 31:31-34 falls in the context of chapters 30 and 31 which have been referred to as Jeremiah’s “Book of Consolation” – where many of his words of hope from a variety of times and settings have been compiled.<sup>2</sup> Some are addressed to the northern

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<sup>1</sup> Jer 31:31-34 NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Boadt, “Jeremiah and the Deuteronomistic History”, in *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 373.

kingdom of Israel; later Jeremiah reused them to comfort the exiles of Judah who would become a new Israel of the future.<sup>3</sup> The oracles include words of healing and visions of hope, the most moving one being about a new covenant.<sup>4</sup>

Jeremiah's vision of the new covenant shows that God is a compassionate God – he will *renew the hearts of the people* to be able to accept his new covenant.<sup>5</sup> The depth and wilfulness of Israel's disobedience to God was so enormous that there had been no hope of preventing the disasters that came upon them.<sup>6</sup> Now, however, at the core of the new covenant is God's gift of a new heart.<sup>7</sup> The heart includes a person's emotional, ethical, and intellectual life.<sup>8</sup>

The new covenant, then, is not dependent on external law or human interpretation – rather, *the law is written on the heart*, involving a revolutionary change in will, heart, and conscience.<sup>9</sup> The law now becomes an instinctive principle of life since it will become part of the nature of God's people.<sup>10</sup> It therefore gives intimate knowledge of and fellowship with God, forgiveness of sins, and peace of heart.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, based on the content of Jeremiah 31:31-34, Boadt concludes that “the future of Israel will not depend so much on the land or the kings but on the obedience of the heart – an obedience possible because *God will give the grace* to make it possible”.<sup>12</sup> In his grace, God determines a way whereby his people will not break the new covenant.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 373-374.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 381.

<sup>6</sup> R. E. Clements, “God's Prophet in Conflict”, in *Jeremiah* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 78.

<sup>7</sup> Charles L. Feinberg, “Jeremiah”, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 576. One can compare this with Ezekiel 36:25-27 where it is written: “A new heart I will give you”. (v. 26)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 574.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 576.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 574.

<sup>12</sup> Boadt, “Jeremiah and the Deuteronomie History”, 381.

<sup>13</sup> Feinberg, “Jeremiah”, 576.

Finally, Jeremiah 31:31-34 shows that the new covenant affords a clear apprehension of God and his will *without human mediation* – in other words, experience of God will be direct.<sup>14</sup> There is no dependence on temple, sacrifices, ark, human priesthood, nation, or country.<sup>15</sup> The knowledge of God is based on a heart experience of divine grace and there is direct access to God.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, this knowledge does not render unnecessary religious instruction, or make every believer self-sufficient and independent of others.<sup>17</sup>

### Message

The new covenant is built on the fact of Israel's failure under the old covenant – the fault lay with the people and their sin; *they* broke the covenant.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the new covenant must supersede the old.<sup>19</sup> According to Clements, “this awareness of the final breaking off of the covenant relationship through Israel's disobedience is an essential part of the theological background to the doctrine of the new covenant that is set out as central to the prophetic message of hope in Jeremiah 31:31-34”.<sup>20</sup> The message is that *the covenant had been broken in such a way that it had been rendered void* – only a new covenant could repair the damage.<sup>21</sup>

The prophets struggled with the reality of human behaviour.<sup>22</sup> The ethical standards had not altered, but from Jeremiah one realizes that to fulfil them requires a moral and

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 577.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 576.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Clements, “God's Prophet in Conflict”, 78.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> David L. Peterson, “Introduction to Prophetic Literature”, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VI, ed. L. E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abington Press, 1998), 21.

religious ability not hitherto reached or achieved.<sup>23</sup> Jeremiah's reference to a new covenant can be seen as a utopian solution to the proclivity of humans to do the errant thing.<sup>24</sup> In fact, he envisions the future of Israel in terms of a new covenant – and the message is that this time there is *a personal relationship established between Yahweh and the individual Israelite*.<sup>25</sup> In other words, as Israel was the people of Yahweh, so the individual person is related to Yahweh.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, Jeremiah sees the future as a time when God will re-establish (some theologians use the word “renew”) his covenant with Israel, this time written in the heart and given *power by God's spirit*.<sup>27</sup> Boadt states, “In the past Israel had never been able to achieve full obedience by its own strength, so now God will not only give the covenant but will also give the grace to live it fully”.<sup>28</sup>

During the exile (597 – 539 B.C.E.<sup>29</sup>), the Deuteronomistic interpreters preached the message that it would be *Yahweh himself who would bring the new age of salvation* – that Yahweh would make a new covenant with his people, which would be kept by everybody of their own free will and would therefore last for ever.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> John L. McKenzie, “Aspects of Old Testament Thought”, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), 1298.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Boadt, “Jeremiah and the Deuteronomic History”, 374.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> John J. Collins, “Introduction: What Are the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament?” in *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 14. In 597 B.C.E., the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and deported the king and nobles to Babylon. In 539 B.C.E., Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon; Jewish exiles were allowed to return to Jerusalem.

<sup>30</sup> Rainer Albertz, “Religion in Israel During and After the Exile”, trans. Hazel Harvey, in *The Biblical World*, vol. II, ed. John Barton (London: Routledge, 2002), 104.

## Elements of the Covenant

Although Jeremiah's oracle of the new covenant is clearly not in the form of a suzerainty treaty as G. E. Mendenhall discusses,<sup>31</sup> the following elements of the new covenant are given emphasis.

To begin with, Jeremiah explicitly presents the *parties* to the covenant as follows: the LORD, the house of Israel, and the house of Judah.<sup>32</sup> Although the two houses of the nation are mentioned, both parts of the nation are included – in other words, the whole covenant is for the whole nation.<sup>33</sup> The new covenant will be with God's chosen people, as was the old.

A second element of the new covenant is that of *election*.<sup>34</sup> The covenant is initiated by Yahweh. The houses of Israel and Judah are the people of Yahweh through the choice of Yahweh. The first person pronoun, "I", referring to Yahweh, appears nine times in verses 31 to 34.

Thirdly, the *guarantor* of the covenant is Yahweh.<sup>35</sup> In the passage, the words, "says the LORD", appear four times, as though to swear by himself.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, in the context of the passage (Jeremiah 31:31-37), is seen the *immutability of the new covenant* – the enduring and unchanging purpose of God stands.<sup>37</sup> In other words, permanence is a feature of the covenant, since there is now an inner force, a new

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<sup>31</sup> McKenzie, "Aspects of Old Testament Thought", 1297-1298. Mendenhall lists the following elements in a suzerainty treaty: (1) preamble; (2) historical prologue; (3) stipulations imposed on the vassal; (4) deposit of treaty in the temple and periodic public reading; (5) list of witnesses; (6) blessings and curses; (7) vassal's oath of obedience; (8) solemn ceremony of oath; (9) procedure against rebellious vassal.

<sup>32</sup> Feinberg, "Jeremiah", 575.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> McKenzie, "Aspects of Old Testament Thought", 1298. In this article, McKenzie explains the concept of *election*.

<sup>35</sup> Feinberg, "Jeremiah", 574.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

power; the inward dynamic was missing in the old covenant.<sup>38</sup> The new covenant, according to Archer, “is stated to be as sure as the continued existence of sun, moon, and stars, or even of the foundations of heaven itself”.<sup>39</sup>

### The God of the Covenant

Several aspects of the God of the covenant emerge from Jeremiah’s significant oracle,<sup>40</sup> described as follows.

The phrase, “I took them by the hand” (v. 32) is a tender nuance of God’s *paternal love* and concern for Israel.<sup>41</sup> Also, God had ever shown *faithfulness* to Israel, as a faithful husband to his wife.<sup>42</sup>

The election made by Yahweh in the new covenant is an act of *love*, not based on the merits or greatness of the houses of Israel and Judah.<sup>43</sup> The overarching emotion in the covenant is love, not fear.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, in the Old Testament election is not regarded as an act of favouritism.<sup>45</sup>

Jeremiah’s moving oracle about God’s *covenant love* is a beautiful vision of the *mercy* and *compassion* of God reaching out.<sup>46</sup> However, God’s covenant love is broader

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 576.

<sup>39</sup> G. L. Archer Jr., “Covenant”, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 300.

<sup>40</sup> Feinberg, “Jeremiah”, 574. Feinberg alludes to the significance of this portion of the book of Jeremiah. It has been acclaimed as one of the most important passages in the entire Old Testament, and has had tremendous influence on New Testament doctrine. According to Feinberg, many expositors maintain that the concept of the new covenant is Jeremiah’s greatest contribution to biblical truth.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 576.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> McKenzie, “Aspects of Old Testament Thought”, 1298.

<sup>44</sup> Feinberg, “Jeremiah”, 577.

<sup>45</sup> McKenzie, “Aspects of Old Testament Thought”, 1298

<sup>46</sup> Boadt, “Jeremiah and the Deuteronomistic History”, 374. Boadt writes how Jeremiah’s vision of the new covenant “also had profound influence on later Christian interpretation of Jesus. Jesus gives a new covenant which can best be described by language borrowed from Jeremiah 31: it depends on the grace of God, it heals the heart and it gives the Spirit”.

than the covenant itself.<sup>47</sup> According to McKenzie, “it is the movement of the will of Yahweh that initiates and continues the history of Israel.”<sup>48</sup> In fact, the entire history of Israel and Yahweh can be summed up as one act of covenant love.<sup>49</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Table 1 on the following page summarizes in tabular form the content, message, covenantal elements, and aspects of the God of the covenant revealed in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and presented in this paper.

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<sup>47</sup> McKenzie, “Aspects of Old Testament Thought”, 1301.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Table 1. Jeremiah 31:31-34 – A New Covenant

<u>Content</u>	<u>Message</u>	<u>Covenantal Elements</u>	<u>The God of the Covenant</u>
God renews the hearts of the people.	The old covenant was broken and rendered void.	Parties to the covenant: God, Israel and Judah	Paternal love
God's law is written on the heart.	A relationship is to exist between Yahweh and each person.	Election: Covenant is initiated by Yahweh	Faithfulness
God gives the grace to obey.	People empowered by God's Spirit.	Guarantor of the covenant: Yahweh	Love, mercy, and compassion
Access to God is without human mediation.	Yahweh himself brings the new age of salvation.	Immutability: God's unchanging purpose	Covenant love

*Source:* Broken Bay Institute, *Studies in the Old Testament (BB412): Readings* (Pennant Hills, NSW: The Broken Bay Institute, 2008) and other sources listed in the Bibliography.

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