

THE CHRISTIAN AND THE NEW COVENANT

Exposition from Jeremiah, Luke, Acts, Romans, II Corinthians and Hebrews

Barry E. Horner

A. INTRODUCTION

The Bible is commonly understood to be comprised of two main divisions, the *Old Testament* or *Covenant* (39 books) and the *New Testament* or *Covenant* (27 books). Even so this most basic of facts is commonly subject to misunderstanding. If it is pointed out that the *Old Testament* is more clearly understood as the *Old Covenant* or *Agreement*, nevertheless confusion often remains when we attempt to more specifically identify the name of this Old Testament or Covenant or Agreement. The reason is that sometimes the Abrahamic Covenant is mistakenly identified as the Old Testament, and with dire theological consequences. As a result it is then suggested that the Abrahamic Covenant has been done away with by the New Covenant. But this is not so. Rather the Old Covenant here is the Mosaic Covenant which was conditionally established 430 years after God made His original promise to Abraham (Gal. 3:16-17).

Further, because the Abrahamic Covenant was unconditionally established well before the Mosaic Covenant, it abides and finds its fulfillment in the New Covenant. In other words, the Abrahamic Covenant is the covenant of promise while the New Covenant is the covenant of fulfillment. The Mosaic Covenant was established as an interim agreement between God and Israel; it was “added because of transgressions . . . until the seed [Jesus Christ] would come to whom the promise had been made” (Gal. 3:19). Now that the Seed has come, He displaces the Mosaic Covenant and fulfills the Abrahamic Covenant by means of personal establishment of the New Covenant.

Nevertheless, with so much talk about the Old Testament of Moses, it sometimes follows that the Abrahamic Covenant appears to take a subservient role while, beyond question, it is in fact of far greater significance than that identified with Moses. The supreme human character of the Old Testament is Abraham, not Moses, and it is hoped that subsequent study will reinforce this fact. Hence a right appreciation of the New Covenant will confirm this truth, that is its character of fulfillment with regard to what was assuredly, inviolately promised through Abraham, in contrast with the temporal, interim, subservient role of the Old Covenant that Moses administered.

B. COVENANT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. Historic meaning in the Bible.

“Covenants,” in a broad sense, are as old as formal, signified human relationships, and for this reason they are found amongst every tribe and tongue upon planet earth. Marriage covenants are sealed by means of a tangible marker, such as a ring, throughout the world. So in the Bible, covenants were established between men by means of token signatures, that is, emblems that concretely indicated that an agreement

had been formalised involving serious commitment to obligation, as well as blessings for covenant keepers and sanctions suitable for covenant breakers. A heap of stones became such a token (Gen. 31:52), as did salt (Num. 18:19; II Chron. 13:5), a shoe (Ruth 4:7; cf. Deut. 25:9-10), oil (II Sam. 5:3), and eyes (Job 31:1). The very first mention of “covenant” reveals God signifying His providential commitment toward “every living creature” in a grandiose manner by means of a rainbow (Gen. 9:12-17).

Then to Abraham God covenanted with three representations of cutting. First there was the sacrificial cutting of a “three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram,” through which divided pieces God passed and unilaterally signified His commitment to the original promise (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:9-10; cf. Jer. 34:18). Second there was the cutting of Abraham’s seed organ in circumcision (Gen. 17:11). Third there was the cutting of a ram as a substitute for Isaac (Gen. 22:13). All three instances signified and ratified Jehovah’s original promise known as the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; cf. 15:18-21; 17:1-8; 22:15-18). In particular the sacrificial cutting of an animal became the dominant means of indicating a solemn contract. Thus in the Old Testament a covenant describes a contractual relationship between not only man and man, whether concerning a king and his subjects, tribes, or small groups, but supremely God and man with regard to atonement being made for sin.

2. Essential meaning in the Bible.

“Covenant,” *berit*, בְּרִית means “to bind/fetter,” for the purpose of establishing a binding treaty, agreement or compact. In numerous instances concerning covenants between God and man, as well as between man and man, the verb “to cut,” *karath*, כָּרַח, was attached to *berit* and thus meant “to cut a covenant,” being commonly translated “to make a covenant” (Gen. 15:18; Exod. 24:8; Deut. 5:2; 9:9 Ps. 50:5; 89:3; Jer. 34:18). Certainly this thought carried over into the contractual relationship between God and Israel where forgiveness of sins was linked with the “shedding of blood” that necessitated the cutting of a sacrifice (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 9:22). So in the New Testament (Covenant), the contractual relationship between God and His people, comprised of Jew and Gentile, is established through the sacrificial cutting of the Son of God, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), “the Great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord” (Heb. 13:20).

C. THE OLD COVENANT ABROGATED IN JEREMIAH 31:32

Paul well reasons that, “if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly. . . . if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law” (Gal. 2:21; 3:21). Hence the presupposition of the necessity of the New Covenant is the deficiency of the former Old Covenant. Thus “there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the Law made nothing perfect” (Heb. 7:18-19). Indeed, no human law or principle or agenda made anyone perfect. Hence Jeremiah, a faithful Jew under the law of Moses if ever there was one, was yet led by the Spirit of God to declare not only the essential deficiency of the Mosaic law, but also a vastly superior replacement. So first we turn to this deficiency in Jeremiah 31:32.

1. The Old Covenant was bilaterally established at the redemption of Israel out of Egypt, having the consequences of blessing or cursing. It was given because of Israel's sin (Gal. 3:19; cf. Rom. 5:20; I Tim. 1:8-11), *not* as a facilitator of righteousness.
2. The Old Covenant was broken by Israel at the very outset of its redemption and formation as a nation, through complaining and groaning, even before it had reached Mount Sinai, with resultant cursing and severe discipline (Jer. 11:1-17; 22:8-9).
3. The Old Covenant was misunderstood by Israel, being addressed as a covenant that encouraged trust in the works of the law, not faith in the grace and mercy of God (Rom. 9:31-32). Because of this the Law proved to be weak, in a manner of speaking, through Israel's flesh (Rom. 8:3); it was incapable of imparting life, saving the soul, and sanctifying the soul.
4. The Old Covenant was faithfully kept by God; "in the wilderness, . . . God carried you, just as a man carries his son" (Deut. 1:31; cf. Isa. 63:13-14), as a loyal husband to an unfaithful, adulterous wife, the result being endless cycles of blessing and cursing.
5. The Old Covenant had been preceded by the unilateral Abrahamic covenant of promise, awaiting total fulfillment. For this reason, "the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God" (Gal. 3:17).

D. THE NEW COVENANT PROMISED IN JEREMIAH (AS A FAR PROSPECT) 31:31, 33-34

The expression "new covenant," בְּרִית ("berith", covenant), חֲדָשׁ ("chadash", new), is only found in the Old Testament in Jeremiah 31:31-34. However, there is broad agreement that many other passages refer of the same basic truth under the names of the "everlasting covenant" (Jer. 32:40; 50:5; Ezek. 16:60; 37:26; Isa. 24:5; 55:3; 61:8), a "new heart/spirit" (Ezek. 11:19; 18:31; 36:26), and a "covenant of peace" (Isa. 54:10; Ezek. 34:25; 37:26).

So, in the midst of a sinful human race, "days are coming . . . when I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah."

1. It is a unilateral covenant. It is established exclusively by God; He, in the sovereignty of His grace will certainly accomplish that which He has proposed.
2. It is a future covenant, beyond the time of Jeremiah. It looks beyond Israel's post-exilic restoration to a time when iniquity is forgiven.
3. It is a covenant primarily made with Israel and Judah. Along with Spurgeon, we believe that language here means a reunited Israel.
4. It is a covenant distinct from the Old Covenant. This is not to be a warmed over or an upgraded Old Covenant; rather the New Covenant is to be radically new.
5. It is a covenant of regeneration. The inward corruption of Israel will experience supernatural new life, the rebirth of the nation's soul.

6. It is a covenant of the righteousness of God. The essential moral character of God, His holy affections, will be inscribed upon the hearts of His people.
7. It is a covenant of reconciliation. An alienated people will be brought near so that “I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”
8. It is a covenant of redemption. The holy character of God will satisfactorily, acceptably justify the ungodly, that is forgive their iniquity.
9. It is a covenant of sovereign faithfulness. This new covenant is as sure as the fixity of the sun and moon, the unfathomable height and depths of heaven and earth, vs. 35-37.
10. It “an everlasting covenant” (Jer. 32:40). The reason is that it is established or cut by means of “the great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord” (Heb. 13:20).

E. THE NEW COVENANT PROMISED (AS A NEAR PROSPECT) IN LUKE 22:14-20

This leads us to the upper room on the night in which Jesus was betrayed. Jesus has given instructions to His disciples for meeting to eat the Passover. Judas is also present as one of the twelve. Thus we read of the promised New Covenant, being represented by earthly tokens, since it is about to be “cut.” “And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’ And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood’” (Luke 22:19-20).

1. The *Benefactor* of this New Covenant is the Lord Jesus Christ.
 - a. This New Covenant, promised in Jeremiah 31:31, is to be actively realized by the Lord Jesus Christ. He is to be cut by means of His willing, voluntary offering of His own body.
 - b. This New Covenant is to be unilateral, wholly established by means of the Lord Jesus Christ’s sovereign obedience, “even unto death” (Phil. 2:8).
 - c. This New Covenant is to be everlasting (Heb. 13:20-21), a finished, fully satisfactory work that establishes reconciliation with God once and for all.
2. The *beneficiaries* of this New Covenant are initially the eleven disciples (Luke 22:20), with Judas’ participation being only external. However these disciples also represent:
 - a. The house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jer. 31:31; Rom. 11:25-27).
 - b. The later engrafted wild olive branches of the Gentiles, also present at this “cutting” (Rom. 11:17).

F. THE NEW COVENANT CUT (ENACTED) IN LUKE 23:33-49

To begin with, consider the Old Testament pattern of sacrificial death by slaying, as represented by Abraham's attempted offering of Isaac, the innumerable offerings in the tabernacle and temple, and then Isaiah's prophetic declaration concerning the submissive Messiah, that He is "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers" (Isa. 53:7). Then ponder the insightful announcement of John the Baptist, who knew Jesus as a youth: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). In every instance, the depicted scene is dramatic, horrifying, gruesome, which, from the divine perspective, reflects the real character of sin, and especially the necessity of death for its satisfaction.

By way of illustration, when a young boy I stayed on a large farm in the outback of Australia. One evening the farmer was asked by his wife to slay a sheep for a meal the next day. So he asked if I would like to watch. Not wanting to seem a coward, I agreed and gingerly looked as he selected a lamb for slaughter. But at the fatal moment I turned my head away.

For Luke, here is no detailed bloody description of the actual act of crucifixion of Jesus Christ; rather the focus is upon the variety of the surrounding witnesses, and the variety of their responses.

1. The Lamb of God was slain in the presence of a variety of witnesses and responses.

As it were, the entire world was present, the military, the felons, the common populace, the rulers both civil and religious. So Luke writes in Acts of the assembled believers in Jerusalem declaring, "O Lord, . . . in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel" (Acts 4:27), and in the very focused presence of God. However, distinct from the variety of eyewitnesses, there is also a diversity of responses and attitudes here. As this New Covenant is being cut it is beheld very differently; it is a "fragrance" to those being saved, but an "aroma of death" to those who are perishing (II Cor. 2:15).

- a. *The Roman soldiers, vs. 33-34, 36-37.* They were raw Gentiles, insensitive to suffering, accustomed to violence, and doing what they were trained and commanded to do. So to relieve the tension they mocked Jesus and made sport of Him. In casting lots and drinking, they initiated worldly enterprise at the feet of Jesus from which they could gain some material advantage. But further, with cheap wine, the soldiers were virtually partying at the foot of the cross, and, as it were, mockingly they asked Jesus to join in their celebration of putting to death "the King of the Jews."
- b. *The two criminals, v. 33, 39-43.* They were "evil-workers" of capital offences, probably Jews. Possibly partners in crime, first they both rail against Jesus' known claims. Having seen and heard the same Christ, now they respond with opposite opinions. One continues with self-centered sarcasm and critically "hurls abuse" at the Christ's seeming contradictory claim. However while one continues to deride

- c. Jesus, now the other fears God and seeks grace. So he receives the grace of light concerning Jesus' righteous person and the assurance of citizenship in paradise.
- d. *The people/crowds, vs. 35, 48.* To begin with, the people stared at this "man of sorrows, acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3a). Then He became "like one from whom men hid their face" (Isa. 53:3b), so that "the crowds began to return beating their breasts," v. 48.
- e. *The rulers of Israel, v. 35.* They "sneered," literally "turned up their noses" at Jesus with superior disdain, especially with contempt for "the Christ of God, His chosen One." That is, they derided His oft repeated declaration of intimacy with His Father that they also correctly interpreted as a claim to deity. Full of themselves, their learning, their authority over the people, their self-righteousness, their seeming victory over this Galilean upstart, they challenge the very sovereignty of the Son of God. They had covenanted death against Jesus who covenanted life.
- f. *Pontius Pilate, through his inscription, is present v. 38.* Humiliated in not being able to exonerate Jesus on account of political pressure, Pilate dictates what Jesus has directly testified to, not what the chief priests would have preferred (John 19:19-22), v. 38.
- g. *The Father, vs. 44-46.* With holy horror, He darkens the land of Israel to indicate the divine trauma of sin claiming and clutching at the only beloved Son. Rocks are split wide, tombs are opened and many are raised, the veil of the temple is rent (Matt. 27:52-53).
- g. *The centurion, v. 47.* He had probably witnessed Jesus' earlier trials and was not impressed with the justice of the proceedings. Nevertheless, as with the repentant criminal, he was enabled to behold the righteousness of Christ, and thus was "praising" God.
- h. *The acquaintances of Jesus, disciples and family, v. 49.* With unspeakable grief and terror, the disciples, the women, and Mary, cringe at the periphery of the wondering crowd. Judas is there, now guilt ridden at his treachery. They *all* see the cutting of God's Son.

2. The Lamb of God was slain as the Son of God's New Covenant self-offering

How astonishing and awesome is this New Covenant whereby "the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief . . . as a guilt offering" (Isa. 53:10). So Jesus declared "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46). The "necessity" of Luke 24:26 was fulfilled. Hence, like willing Isaac, Jesus yielded Himself to His father as "the Lamb of God" (John 1:29), that is "He offered up Himself" (Heb. 7:27; cf. 9:14). With regard to the Old Covenant, the New Covenant is incomparable.

- a. *The Old Covenant* was signified on tables of stone; it was also a covenant cut with the shedding of blood, the blood of bulls, that was physically sprinkled on the people (Exod. 24:1-8).

- b. *The New Covenant* becomes engraved on human hearts, it being a covenant cut with the shedding of the more effectual blood of the Son of God. So the writer to Hebrews puts the matter most clearly. “If the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb. 9:13-14).

H. THE NEW COVENANT FULFILLED IN ACTS AND ROMANS

1. In *Acts*, the New Covenant gospel is to be proclaimed to the Jew first, and then to the Gentile. Jesus directs His disciples that, “you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Immediately following the cutting of the New Covenant, how were its terms to be personally appropriated and put into practice, in harmony with the promise of Christ (Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10; cf. Acts 1:8; 8:1)? It is interesting that although Luke has described the New Covenant in terms of promise in Luke 22 and its actual fulfillment or “cutting” in Luke 23, yet in *Acts* he never once uses this Jewish terminology, or for that matter the “love” of God. The reason may well be that for Gentiles different language was thought more appropriate. The predominant truth in *Acts* is that Jesus is the Christ/Messiah, the Son of God, crucified and risen from the dead (2:23-24, 36; 3:14-21, 26; 4:10-12, 33; 5:30-31; 8:32-37; 9:20, 22; 10:36, 42-43; 13:23-39; 15:11; 16:30-31; 17:3, 18, 30-31; 18:4-5, 25-28; 19:4-10; 22:14-15; 24:24; 26:15-18, 23; 28:20-28). Furthermore we must remember that *Acts* is essentially an historic account of facts and events and geographic expansion where the expression “preaching the gospel” (Acts 8:25, 40; 14:7, 15, 21; 15:7; 16:10; 20:24) broadly covers the details of the gospel that are elsewhere expounded in much more detail concerning the *purpose* of Christ’s death and resurrection.

- a. The New Covenant was proclaimed to the Jews first.

This was fulfilled nationally through apostolic declaration originating from Jerusalem. The result was severe persecution through Saul, including Stephen’s martyrdom, and consequent dispersal of the Jewish Christians (Acts 2:1-8:3).

- b. The New Covenant was then proclaimed to the Samaritans.

These were Jew/Gentile hybrids, particularly despised in Jerusalem. Deacon Philip initiated welcome gospel outreach here, at which Peter and John came to investigate. So they prayerfully mediated the Holy Spirit’s outpouring (Acts 8:4-24).

- c. The New Covenant was then proclaimed to the Gentiles.

This was by means of divine confrontation with Peter. Nothing less could break through the rigid, exclusive spirit of this Apostle, that took time for its cleansing from Peter’s system.

(1) In Caesarea.

This was fulfilled through Peter. The revelation here had to be provided in triplicate, and authenticated by the outpoured Holy Spirit that could not be contradicted (Acts 10:1-11:18).

(2) In Antioch.

This was fulfilled through persecution leading to considerable Gentile conversions in (Syrian) Antioch. Barnabas, sent from Jerusalem to oversee, enrolls Paul from Tarsus (Acts 11:19-30).

(3) In regions beyond.

This was fulfilled through Barnabas, Paul and his associates (Acts 12:24-28:21). Barnabas later goes to Cyprus, while Paul makes extensive journeys to Asia Minor and Europe.

2. In *Romans*, the New Covenant gospel is to be proclaimed to the Jew first, then to the Gentile, and then to the Jew again.

a. To the Jew, then the Gentile in Romans 1-2.

(1) In writing to the church at Rome, it being predominantly Gentile, Paul makes plain the divine order. The gospel is “for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16; cf. 2:9-10; 3:29; Acts 1:8; 3:25-26; 9:15; 28:14-29; I Pet. 4:17).

(2) How then does Romans 1:16 play out in Paul’s actual missionary outreach in which the gospel was to be offered? This same basic principle was revealed by the Lord Jesus to Ananias at Damascus, namely that Paul was “to bear My [Christ’s] name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel” (Acts 9:15). As a result Paul consistently witnessed to the Jews at every opportunity, even from the beginning at Damascus following his conversion (Acts 9:22).

Paul’s *first missionary journey* saw initial synagogue witness at Salamis, Pisidian Antioch, and Iconium (Acts 13: 5, 14; 14:1). Note that Acts 13:46 reveals his comment that: “It was necessary that the Word of God be spoken to you [Jews at Pisidian Antioch] first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.” Nevertheless, at the next stop at Iconium, Paul first visits the synagogue.

Paul’s *second missionary journey* finds him seeking the Jews first at Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus (Acts 16:13; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4, 19). Note that Acts 18:6 records his vehement denunciation: “Your blood [that of the Jews at Athens] be on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” Nevertheless, at the next stop at Ephesus, Paul first visits the synagogue.

Paul's *third missionary journey* finds him passing through Galatia and Phrygia; then he returns to Ephesus, but first to the synagogue there (Acts 19:8). Moving westward to Greece and further conflict with "the Jews" (Acts 20:3), he returns to Jerusalem via Philippi, Troas and Miletus.

Paul's *final missionary journey*, in which he is led captive to Rome for trial, commences in Jerusalem where he witnesses in the Temple (Acts 21:26), and declares to the Jews that, "I am a Jew" (Acts 22:3). Then three days following his arrival at Rome, Paul "called together those who were the leading men of the Jews" and declared that, "I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel" (Acts 28:17, 20). Thus the Apostle, although repeatedly scorned and assailed by the Jews, yet manifested an indefatigable and gracious persistence toward those to whom he nevertheless felt so indebted (Rom. 9:4-5). Paul was decidedly pro-semitic, even when faced with the most stubborn unbelief and spiritual adultery (9:1-3; 10:1; 11:1, 11; cf. Hosea 11:8-9).

b. To the Jew, then the Gentile, then the Jew in Romans 9-11.

We have found that the gospel priority for the Jew that Romans 1:16 declares was also the identical priority for Paul in his many years of evangelistic ministry, as Acts has clearly and repeatedly related. However, here in Romans 9-11 the focus concerning Jew and Gentile is upon God's perspective in history, that is how He, over the centuries, has promised further priority to the Jew, even in the light of the Gentiles having had such a long day.

- (1) There was initial New Covenant proclamation to the Jews as unbelieving people, that is during the early years of the Christian church, especially by means of the mother church at Jerusalem (Rom. 10:8-21; cf. Acts 2:5). To begin with the gospel was considered to be wholly a Jewish "New Covenant."
- (2) There has been and is present New Covenant proclamation during the times of the Gentiles (Luke 21:24; Acts 8:15; Rom. 11:25). But a "remnant" of Jewish Christians through the centuries proves that there has not been a total abandonment (Rom. 11:1-5).
- (3) There will be future New Covenant proclamation and conversion of the Jews after the times of the Gentiles has been fulfilled (Rom. 11:12, 23-24, 25-32). This will especially involve that time when "the Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob" (Rom. 11:26).

However, then in v. 27 we come to the only singular mention of "covenant" in Romans.¹ Of what "covenant," as referenced in the Old Testament, is Paul here writing? Whether the primary reference here is to Isaiah 27:9; 59:20-21 or Jeremiah 31:33, surely the New Covenant is plainly in Paul's mind, and particularly as the only hope of the saving of national Israel. This is even

¹ The other reference of "the covenants" is in Romans 9:4 where, in the light of 11:27, they may include the New Covenant. Note that here some manuscripts read "the covenant," which would then parallel the Abrahamic covenant of 11:28.

more distinctly indicated by means of v. 28 where Paul's concern is for "they," the unbelieving nation according to "the sake of the fathers/on account of the patriarchs."

The New Covenant, the cutting of the Son of God, is the only hope of the saving of the Jew or the Gentile. So the Lord Jesus was, "stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed" (Isa. 53:4-5).

G. THE NEW COVENANT REINFORCED IN HEBREWS 8:7-13

The founding mother church in Jerusalem was essentially Jewish. Hence the Jewish Christians there were constantly exposed to anti-Christian Judaism. As such they were confronted with endless challenges to their new faith, especially the pressure to maintain necessary commitment to the Mosaic law. For this reason the *Epistle to the Hebrews* was written.

1. Introduction to *Hebrews*.

a. The title.

The title, ΠΡΟΣ ἙΒΡΑΙΟΥΣ, PROS HEBRAIUS, "TO [THE] HEBREWS," not in the original text, is nevertheless traceable to the end of the second century and rightly suggests that the addressees were obviously Jewish Christians,² that is, "a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Rom. 11:5). More words comprising Old Testament quotations are recorded in this Epistle than any other New Testament book.³ No pagan background, associated with Gentile converts, is mentioned. To understand this truth concerning the author's Hebrew background, his Hebrew use of Scripture and His Hebrew mode of address to Hebrews is vital for a right understanding of Hebrews. To impose a Gentile/Greek mind-set upon Hebrews is to lead to conclusions the author never intended.

b. The problems.

When religious people are converted to biblical Christianity, it is common for them to still carry old baggage from the past and somewhat mingle it with that which is new. During the middle of the first century this was particularly the case, especially when one considers that the early Christian church was mainly Jewish to begin with. Then the gradual transition to Gentile dominance increased the challenges that Jewish Christians faced from Jews. They were often exhorted to retain submission to Jewish traditions and legal demands associated with the Old Covenant, the result being a tendency toward spiritual retardation. To counter this inevitable stunted spiritual growth, the *Epistle to the Hebrews* was written.

² This opinion has prevailed over the centuries of church history, Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews To Revelation, New Testament Introduction*, pp. 24-29.

³ This calculation is based upon the bold face Old Testament quotations indicated in *The Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies, Fourth Revised Edition.

However, in this *Epistle* there is not the slightest encouragement for the Jewish Christian to repudiate his essential Jewishness provided it is associated with Abraham rather than Moses, and fulfilled in Christ.

Hence the overall address in *Hebrews* is to a considerable group of Hebrew Christians, probably either in Judea or Rome, who have become “dull of hearing” and as a consequence, “have need again for someone to teach . . . the elementary principles of the oracles of God, [that is] . . . milk and not solid food” (5:11-12). The danger is of the addressees “drifting away” (2:1), of “neglect of so great a salvation” (2:3), of “an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God” (3:12), of “sluggishness” (6:12), of “forsaking our own assembling together” (10:25), of “varied and strange teachings” (13:9). But especially they are prone to having an insufficient understanding of the superiority of Jesus Christ’s New Covenant priesthood over Moses and Aaron, both ministers of the Old Covenant. Consequently the addressees are, “not to be carried away with varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, and not by foods, through which those who were so occupied were not benefited” (13:9).

c. The remedy.

So the most effectual remedy for such a spiritual malaise is the exaltation of the person and work of Jesus Christ, that is His inauguration of the New Covenant in contrast with the Mosaic Old Covenant. Thus being awakened afresh to his incomparable and exalted glory inevitably causes the removal of legal barnacles, that is impeding feeble “shadows” (10:1), with the result that, “we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely Jesus, because of the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone” (2:9). Again: “Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession” (3:1). Thus, we have, “become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance until the end” (3:14). For this reason, “how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (9:14).

Consequently, in *Hebrews*, the author having already established the superiority of Jesus Christ’s priesthood over that of Aaron in terms of it being a “better hope” (7:19), he now introduces the explanatory terminology of a “better covenant” (7:22) that is based upon “better promises” (8:6). But where are those “better promises” to be found? For the author of *Hebrews* the answer is plain, that is in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

2. The New Covenant conformed in *Hebrews* 8:7-13

Because the readers of this *Epistle* are almost certainly Jewish, we can assume that here the reference to the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 would be very familiar to them. Common Jewish interpretation expected an improved/updated Old Testament/Covenant, whereas the writer of *Hebrews* makes it clear that a radically new New Covenant is to be understood here.

a. The necessity of the New Covenant, v. 7.

- (1) To begin with, the impotence of the Old Covenant is plainly compared with the potency of the New Covenant. Actually the fault or blame here concerns, not intrinsic fault, but mainly the Law's inability to effect change in the children of Israel, its lack of dynamic (Rom. 8:3-4). As Hughes explains:

The 'fault' of the old covenant lay, not in its essence, which, as we have said, presented God's standard of righteousness and was propounded as an instrument of life to those who should keep it, but in its inability to justify and renew those who failed to keep it, namely the totality of fallen mankind.⁴

- (2) In other words, if the wrong assumptions of the Old Covenant were true, then this New Covenant would not have been necessary. However a right understanding of the Old Covenant's impotence establishes the necessity of the New Covenant's potency. The misunderstanding here of the purpose of the Law, in the form of a Jewish Galatianism (cf. Luke 18:11-12; Gal. 3:1-3), the synergism of faith and works, simply magnified the sin of self-righteousness.

b. The addressees of the New Covenant, v. 8.

While we faced this question of the meaning of "the house of Israel and . . . the house of Judah" in our study of Jeremiah 31, now we face the same question in terms of the intent of the author of *Hebrews*, yet in the context of a new Christian economy. There are two critical, opposing views here with regard to the precise identification of "Israel" and "Judah."

- (1) The inclusive nature of the church.

This interpretation, especially dominant since the time of Augustine, declares that "Israel" and "Judah" are to be reinterpreted as the people of God, whether Jew or Gentile, in the church age. It is said that because *Hebrews* addresses Christians in general, then a more comprehensive meaning is intended. One commentator puts it this way concerning Jeremiah 31:31.

Old Covenant Israel may be regarded as a typological representation of the elect people of God. . . . As a unified people, the participants of the new covenant today are "Israel."⁵

In other words, every Christian is a spiritual Israelite, and as a consequence, there is no longer any divine, covenantal recognition of the Jew, individually, nationally, territorially. Thus God is finished with Old Testament Judaism, even though it still functions socially, politically and ethnically at a mere worldly level.

⁴ Hughes, *Hebrews*, pp. 297-98.

⁵ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ Of The Covenants*, pp. 288-289.

(2) The inclusive nature of Israel/Judah.

This interpretation is driven by the belief that “Israel” and “Judah” here mean exactly that, “Israel” and “Judah,” as was the case in Jeremiah 31:34. They comprise the nation of Israel as a whole, yet to be converted in total and thus reunited, according to Ezekiel 37 and Romans 11:26. At the present, God still has divine, covenantal interest in unbelieving Israel (Rom. 11:28). Then what is he meaning here? Exactly the same as was the case in Jeremiah 31:31, that is “Israel” and “Judah” mean exactly that, namely “Israel” and “Judah.” Surely this is the intent of the *Jewish* author as he writes to *Jewish* Christians. Then what place does *Hebrews* have for Gentile Christians? Much, except that it comes by way of being engrafted into Israel (Rom. 11:17-24; Eph. 2:11-16). The blessings of *Hebrews* are mediated in and through Israel, not by means of the forfeiture and disinheritance of Israel.

(3) The historic consequences involved.

The displacement, supercession, replacement, absorption, fulfillment view of Israel here, has been the cause of centuries of great suffering for the Jews, especially at the zealous hands of Christians, since they have become regarded as disenfranchised and thus *persona non grata* in the sight of God. They are Christ-killers, guilty of deicide, and forever abandoned by God. Anti-judaism, anti-Zionism is closely associated here.

The recognition that God has *not* finally cast aside the nation of Israel, has been the cause of centuries of special missions outreach to the Jews, as well as modern support for Israel, in spite of its unbelief, even as we support our unbelieving loved ones. Read J. C. Ryle and Horatius Bonar and C. H. Spurgeon in this regard. A right understanding of the New Covenant must lead to heartfelt love for those who will inherit it.

c. The inferiority of the *impotent* Old Covenant, v. 9.

“Not according to the covenant which I made with their fathers, on the day of my having taken them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not abide in my covenant, and I did not care for them, says the Lord.” The language continues to focus on national Israel and Judah, but particularly their distinctive Mosaic legacy. Especially note Jeremiah’s recollection concerning Israel’s commitment to and yet violation of this bilateral covenant (Jer. 7:23-26; 34:17-20; cf. Exod. 24:3-8), which the author now also recollects. The emphasis here especially concerns *the lack of sanctifying righteousness* which the law was incapable of producing. Consequently, God abandoned His people, yet not forever. The features of “weakness and uselessness,” “shadowiness,” and “faultiness,” previously mentioned (7:18; 8:5, 7), that characterized the old covenant, now lead us to the distinguishing strengths or categories of “newness” that are incorporated in the New Covenant, vs. 10-12.

d. The superiority of the *potent* New Covenant, vs. 10-12.

The contrasting unilateral nature of this covenant, its address to the heart of the human problem, its implementation through sole sovereign initiative, its fulfillment that is unconditionally certain, is as sure as the fixity of the sun, the moon, and the stars in the heavens; only if finite man can reach into and measure the infinite heights and depths of creation will Israel “cease to be a nation” and be required to give account for its sins (Jer. 31: 35-37).

(1) It is God’s *inscription* on the hearts of Israel (Jer. 31:33), v. 10.

“For this covenant [διαθήκη, diathēkē] [is that] which I will covenant [διατίθημι, diatithēmi] with the [reunited] house of Israel after those days, ‘says the LORD,’ [gratuitously/graciously] placing My laws [νόμους μου, nomous mou]⁶ into their understanding/mind [διάνοια, dianoia], and I will inscribe [ἐπιγράφω, epigraphō] them on their hearts.” In other words, God will supernaturally invade and regenerate the souls of His rebellious people according to His divine, merciful initiative. By this means, saving faith will be granted to Israel; the result will be the will to believe, to admire, to praise, to worship, to obey; there will be national regeneration (Isa. 66:8; Ezek. 36:22-31; 37:1-23) and national repentance (Zech. 12:10-14). As John Brown comments:

Others consider it [here] as a prediction referring to the new economy generally, and that the phrases, “house of Israel,” and “house of Judah,” are to be understood mystically of the true Israel, whether Jews or Gentiles. But it seems to me quite plain, that the words are a prophecy of that general conversion of the Jews to Christianity which we are warranted to look for from many Old Testament predictions, and from the express declaration of the Apostle, that a period is coming when “all Israel shall be saved” [Rom. 11:26]. It may indeed be said, How does the passage, in this view, answer the Apostle’s object? The answer is easy. The covenant which in the last days of the Christian dispensation the Jews generally are to be brought under, is substantially the same covenant which, ratified in the blood of Jesus, has been, during the course of eighteen centuries, diffusing its blessings to an innumerable multitude of individuals, of every kindred, and people, and tongue, and nation.⁷

⁶ Does this simply mean that the Mosaic code, Torah, will be internalized as some suggest, such as Richard C. Barcellos, *In Defense of the Decalogue*, pp. 15-24; Walter Kaiser, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 233; and Reconstructionists? David Stern comments that the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34 has become Torah, cf. Heb. 8:6b, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, pp. 687-89. Given that this may be so, nevertheless would it not be more correct then to speak of “New Torah”? But this does not answer our original question. The “laws” of God here (as distinct from the singular in Jeremiah), are not distinguished as “moral laws,” as Decalogue only. Hence, a new code of the righteousness of God must be intended. Further, as Moo explains, “[T]here are references in the prophets to a *tôrâ* that will be established in the last days and that probably does not refer to the Mosaic law as such (Isa. 2:3; 42:4; 51:4, 7; Mic. 4:2). This ‘Zion Torah,’ perhaps to be understood as a fresh publication of God’s will for His people, in continuity with but not identical to the ‘Sinai torah,’ may be what is envisaged in Jeremiah 31:33-34 and the Ezekiel texts.” Bahnsen, Kaiser Jr., Moo, Strickland, VanGemeren, *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, pp. 345-47.

⁷ Brown, *Hebrews*, I, p. 372.

The law of the old covenant was misconstrued aside from faith (Rom 9:31-33); it was a revelation that was wrongly presumed to have an intrinsic, sanctifying dynamic. Similarly there was a wrong presumption concerning man's supposed possession of an intrinsic, volitional ability that enabled him to obey this same law. Notice the right order here first of God's sovereign covenant commitment, "I will put My laws, . . . I will write them, . . . I will be their God." Then, as a consequence, all will know Me," v. 11. The heart of legalism is a proud presumption, by polluted man, concerning confidence in nonexistent, moral human ability.

Of course the Gentiles will enter into this same regeneration, conversion, and justification according to that great gospel age in which the "wild olive branches" are engrafted into "the rich root of the olive tree" (Rom. 11:17); this runs parallel with that period when "the fullness of the Gentiles" will come to pass (Luke 21:24; Rom. 11:25). This will likewise be a work of pure sovereign grace. Following Gentile regeneration will be the great Jewish ingathering (Rom. 11:15, 23-26): "This is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins" (Rom. 11:27).

- (2) It is God's *revelation* of Himself to Israel (Jer. 31:34a), v. 11.

"And they will [definitely] not teach everyone, his fellow citizen, and everyone, his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord' [as in times past], because all will know Me from the least to the greatest of them [Isa. 54:13]." As Farrar explains, a further New Covenant distinctive "is that there shall be no *appropriation* of knowledge; no sacerdotal exclusiveness; no learned caste that shall monopolize the keys of knowledge, and lock out those who desire to enter in,"⁸ as described in Matthew 23:13 (Luke 11:43; I Tim. 1:6-7). In other words, there will be an anointed priesthood of all believers (I Pet. 2:9). Formerly, there had been an emphasis upon the efficacy of cerebral biblical education by means of an elite class of rabbis through synagogues, akin to a sterile church membership class. Pink adds:

During the Mosaic economy, and particularly in the last century before Christ, there was an external teaching of the Law, which the people trusted and rested in without any regard for God's teaching by the inward circumcision of the heart. Such teaching had degenerated into rival schools and sects, such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Essenes, etc., and they made void the word of God through their traditions (Mark 7:13). It was against such the last of Israel's prophets had announced: 'The Lord will cut off . . . the master and scholar out of the tabernacles of David' (Mal. 2:12).⁹

- (3) It is God's *revelation* of mercy to Israel (Jer. 31:34b), v. 12.

"Because I shall be merciful/propitious [ἵλεως, hileōs; cf. 2:17, by sacrificial satisfaction, akin to propitiation; Rom. 3:24-26] to their unrighteousnesses, and their sins I shall [definitely] remember/hold against them no longer/ever again." In contrast with the Old Covenant, which was bilateral according to

⁸ Farrar, *Hebrews*, p. 131.

⁹ Pink, *Hebrews*, I, p. 457.

obedience or disobedience, the fundamental basis of the New Covenant is God's unilateral, merciful, effectual intent that triumphantly confronts the "unrighteousnesses" and "sins" of those sinners He has set His heart upon. Notwithstanding the absence of any comment here by Calvin, this verse conveys the supreme distinction between these two covenants (John 1:17; Heb. 1:1-2), which the Apostle Paul boldly preached to the Jews in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch: "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him [Jesus Christ] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39).

e. The newness of the New Covenant, v. 13.

"In which He said, '[a] new [covenant],' He has made old/obsolete [παλαιόω, palaiōō] the former [πρῶτος, prōtos; covenant]; but in being made old it is also growing old [being] near to disappearance/abolition [ἀφανισμός, aphanismos]." Here now is the author's summation of the preceding quotation concerning what he has been focusing on from the beginning with regard to former "weakness and uselessness," "shadow," "faultiness" (7:18; 8:5, 7). Both covenants having been ordained of God, it is wholly His prerogative, according to the gracious movement and progressive plan of His will, to replace an inferior order with a superior order. We could say of a garment, "That which is by its very nature destined to become old/obsolete/out of fashion is presently becoming old to the point where it is about ready to be discarded." So the old covenant, "being made old [prone to failure/obsolescence]. . . is also [presently] growing old [to the point where it is about to be discarded]."

Assuming that the Jerusalem temple is still standing and operative, then there is here, according to Jesus (Mark 13:2; cf. John 2:19) and Stephen (Acts 6:14), anticipation of the immanent destruction of Herod's temple and the whole sacrificial order. Greg Bahnsen illustrates the difficulty here of the Theonomist when he writes: "[T]he coming of Christ has brought a change of law regarding the priesthood (Heb. 7:12), and the administrative [as opposed to the moral] order of the old covenant is vanishing away (Heb. 8:13)."¹⁰ However, where in the Bible do the terms "first [covenant]," v. 1, or "old [covenant]," v. 13, ever indicate the human designations of only civil and ceremonial law to the exclusion of the so-called moral law? Furthermore, as Hoch, Jr. explains in the light of 7:12, "the new order belongs to a different law than the old order. To change Aaron is to change Aaron's system. If Aaron goes, the covenant that designates him as its high priest also goes."¹¹ Hence it is the whole Sinaitic dispensation that has become superseded, including the so-called moral, civil and ceremonial law. It is "the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones [especially the moral law so called], . . . the ministry of condemnation, . . . which fades away" (II Cor. 3:7, 9, 11). In accord with Galatians 3:24-25, this old covenant system has prepared the way over the centuries as "a tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. But now [in the continuity of history] that faith [particularly in the New Covenant] has come, we are no longer under a tutor" (Rom. 7:1-4). Thus Owen

¹⁰ Bahnsen, Kaiser Jr., Moo, Strickland, VanGemeren, *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, p. 104.

¹¹ Hoch, Jr., *All Things New*, p. 123.

concludes his comment on this verse: “All the glorious institutions of the law were at best but as stars in the firmament of the church, and therefore were all to disappear at the rising of the Sun of Righteousness. Τῷ Θεῷ δόξα, [Tō Theō doxa, To God, [let there be] glory].”¹²

J. THE NEW COVENANT AS A CHRISTIAN ADMINISTRATION IN II CORINTHIANS 3:1-18.

The consequences of the Old Mosaic Covenant being abrogated by the New Covenant of Jesus Christ are radical, especially for the Jew, so much so that divine intervention was necessary to convince both Peter and Paul of this truth. Jewish Peter received a vision from the Lord in triplicate (Acts 10:9-16), while Jewish Paul received direct revelation and instruction from the same Lord (Gal. 1:11-12; 2:2; I Cor. 11:23; 15:3).

The church at Corinth having already been addressed by Paul concerning abuse and disorder in I Corinthians, is now in II Corinthians further confronted with follow-up about grievances rectified, present ministry, and personal accusations. So after a measure of boasting in the triumph of the gospel (2:14-17), Paul is sensitive to the charge of self-praise: “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?” (3:1). His immediate response is to declare that such an accusation of self-boasting is really quite unnecessary. Why? Because the Corinthian believers are in themselves, quite apart from the lips of Paul and his associates, a “letter [of commendation/approval/confidence], written in our hearts, known and read of all men” (3:2).

Consequently this thought is a trigger to Paul, the converted Jewish Rabbi, whereby he commences to think in terms of the ground of all triumph and boasting and approval, that is the vast superiority of the New Covenant in comparison with that of the Old Covenant.

1. The superior New Covenant is engraved upon living epistles, vs. 1-6.

From what follows, we plainly see that Paul understands the church at Corinth to be governed exclusively by the New Covenant, to the exclusion of the Old Covenant. There can be no mingling.

a. The result is living letters authored by Christ, vs. 1-3.

The Old Covenant comprised divine inscription upon “tablets of stone,” which unquestionably references the Ten Commandments or the so-called moral law (Exod. 24:12; 34:1; Deut. 9:9-11; 10:1). The New Covenant comprises divine inscription upon “tablets of human hearts,” especially “Corinthian Christian

¹² Owen, *Hebrews*, IV, p. 177. In a posthumous treatise on *The Dominion Of Sin And Grace* based on Romans 6:14, published in 1688, Owen further provides four reasons why the Christian is not under law. “1. The law *giveth no strength against sin* unto them that are under it, but grace doth. . . . 2. The law *gives no liberty of any kind*; it gendereth unto bondage, and so cannot free us from any dominion. . . . 3. The law *doth not supply us with effectual motives and encouragements* to endeavor the ruin of the dominion of sin in a way of duty. . . . It works only by fear and dread, with threatenings and terrors of destruction. . . . 4. *Christ is not in the law*; he is not proposed in it, not communicated by it,—we are not made partakers of him thereby. This is the work of grace, of the gospel. . . He [Christ] alone ruins the kingdom of Satan, whose power is acted in the rule of sin.” *Works*, VII, pp. 542-51.

hearts,” and surely this brings to mind a host of Old Testament references that anticipate the regenerating New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 11:19; 36:26-27).

- b. The result is living letters authored by the Holy Spirit, vs. 4-6.
Now Paul indicates that “we,” that is he, as a Jewish Christian, and the Corinthian Christians being predominantly Gentile, are together benefactors of the New Covenant “through Christ,” v. 4. This means that all boasting is excluded (Rom. 3:27), especially that charged by Paul’s antagonists, since personal adequacy and confidence is solely “from God,” v. 5. Specifically, the root of our adequacy is as “servants of a new covenant, v. 6,” that radically contrasts with the former old covenant of impotent letters engraved on stone. This contrast is now repeatedly, emphatically laid out. It compares the Old Covenant, as essentially mediating *death* (Rom. 7:5, 10, 13; I Cor. 15:56) with the New Covenant, as essentially mediating *life* (Rom. 7:6; 8:2-4). Thus, “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,” v. 6. In other words, the Mosaic covenant slays (Rom. 5:20; 7:9; Gal. 2:19; 2:19); it is incapable of producing life. But the Spirit conveys righteousness by means of the very life and Spirit of God (John 6:6). Thus “now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter” (Rom. 7:6).

- 2. The superior New Covenant is engraved through the Holy Spirit, vs. 7-11.

Paul now goes to great lengths by repeatedly contrasting the temporal old covenant with the eternal new covenant. To suggest that here he merely has in mind the so-called “civil” and “ceremonial” law is simply incomprehensible.

- a. The superiority of the ministry of the Spirit over Moses, vs. 7-8.

The old covenant was a glorious ministry of death engraved upon lifeless tablets of stone that eventually faded/ended/passed away. The veil on Moses’ shining face, protected Israel from beholding the righteous glory of God that their sinful state could not endure. However the new covenant, being a ministry of the vital, eternal Spirit of God, must inevitably be greater on account of life-giving glory that enables the Christian to receive and behold, “the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (4:6).

- b. The superiority of the ministry of righteousness over Moses, v. 9.

By way of repetition, the old covenant was a glorious ministry of condemnation resulting in fear (Exod. 19:16-18; Heb. 12:18-21), whereas the new covenant ushered in a more glorious ministry of “righteousness,” a very Pauline expression (Rom. 3:21; 8:1-10), that is saving righteousness, “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ” (Rom. 3:22),

- c. The superiority of the ministry of transcendence over Moses, v. 10.

By way of further repetition, the old covenant had legal glory in a limited, temporal sense, especially in terms of its divine purpose (Gal. 3:19-26). However this pales into nothing, even as the law is totally done away with (Heb. 7:18; 8:7,

13), when compared with the incomparable, eternal glory of the new covenant that abides forever (Heb. 7:21-28).

- d. The superiority of the ministry of permanence over Moses, v. 11.

By way of yet further repetition, the old covenant having a temporary glory has “faded away” (NASB), has “been brought to an end” (ESV), has “passed away” (NKJV). However the new covenant, because it remains as “the blood of the eternal covenant” Heb. 13:20), has unending glory, which results in unending consequences for those who participate in it.

3. The superior New Covenant engraved unto the glory of the Lord, vs. 12-18.

The conclusion of Paul’s reasoning concerns the *modus operandi* with regard to *how* the human heart is to be engraved with the terms of the new covenant and thus evidence newness of life, vs. 3, 6. The climactic answer is revealed in v. 18. Note that here in vs. 12-18 the thought introduced in vs. 7-8 concerning Moses’ glory is expanded upon. Remember that the great overall issue really concerns the possibility of man, whether Jew or Gentile, beholding the glory of God with glad acceptance rather than fearful condemnation.

- a. The fading glory of Moses, vs. 12-15.

Paul does not flinch from confessing “great boldness,” v. 12, cf. vs. 3:1, 4, since he so exalts in the transcendent glory of the new covenant. To emphasize this he recalls the temporal glory of Moses’ glowing face upon his descent from Mt. Sinai with the tablets of the law. Consequently the prophet veiled himself since “they [the children of Israel] were afraid to come near him” (Exod. 34:29-30, 34-35). Doubtless their recent idolatry concerning the golden calf had only added to their alienation (Exod. 32:1-35), whereas Moses was able to draw near as the friend of God (Exod. 33:11). Thus the veil, like the law, restricted Israel from beholding God’s glory, especially with delight.

However, as is common with the Hebrew interpretation of the Old Testament, the author here in v. 13 adds a different meaning because he is so intent on pressing home the transitory nature of the old covenant, a truth which the Hebrew Christian reader might be reluctant to accept. Hence Moses also placed the veil over his face so that the Israelites would not discern its fading character.

The Greek implies that Moses placed the veil on his face *after* speaking to the people that they might not see the glory on his face fading. . . . The fact seems to be that St. Paul, as is extremely common with him, and as occurs several times in this chapter (as in v. 3 and v. 18-see also 2:15) gives the simile he is employing another direction. . . . The figure of the veil once more occurs to him as an illustration of the fact that the Jews, for reasons which are obvious enough, were not encouraged to look upon the Law as a transitory dispensation. . . . Many commentators have supposed here an illusion to Christ as the end of the law (Rom. 10:4).¹³

¹³ J. J. Lias, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, p. 53.

Thus the veil brought about an unfortunate blinding of the temporal nature of the old Mosaic covenant.

So throughout the subsequent centuries of the history of Israel, a hardening of hearts, resulting in unbelief, has become a veil that has restricted God's ancient people from appreciating the *temporary* nature of the old covenant that was in fact designed by God to be a mere prelude to the new covenant.

b. The transforming glory of the Lord, vs. 16-18.

But now Jesus Christ has come as “the mediator of a better covenant” (Heb. 8:6), that initiates regeneration and righteousness inscription of the heart, particularly through the agency of the Holy Spirit. All of this is a result of the promised new covenant. Hence, “whenever a person [Jew or Gentile] turns [through faith] to the Lord [Jesus], the veil is taken away,” v. 16. The hard heart is softened, the blinding veil is removed, with the result that the believer is able to gladly behold a number of truths.

- (1) He had earlier believed that the Old Covenant, the tables of stone, as Paul here speaks of it, was an everlasting ordinance. Therefore, like Israel, a restrictive veil was imposed that resulted in a degree of hardening, v. 14. The glory of the gospel became clouded because of attempting to contain new wine in old wineskins (Luke 5:37). But now he sees that the old covenant was temporary, an interim covenant, until the mediator of the new covenant should come, v. 16.
- (2) He sees that “the Lord is the Spirit,” v. 17, which means that he understands that the Spirit of Christ substitutes for the letter of the law, v. 6, that is the Spirit of Christ substitutes for the spirit of Moses, the Spirit of liberty through the new covenant substitutes for the spirit of bondage inherent in the old covenant. “The last Adam became a life-giving spirit” (I Cor. 15:45).
- (3) He sees the Lord Jesus, “with unveiled heart,” a renewed heart, uncluttered with misunderstanding about the old covenant as are many Christians, v. 18. The new covenant Christian is not “beholding an upgraded/reconstituted Moses” as it were. Rather he is “beholding in an [incarnate] mirror the glory of the Lord [Jesus],” and thus His Father, cf. 4:6. In contrast with the veil that, law-like, *restricts* a vision of the saving glory of the Lord, Jesus Christ *reflects* the glory of His Father for all who believe in His Son to see.
- (4) Consider Peter, James, and John at the transfiguration, after Moses and Elijah have just departed. Then we are told, “Jesus was found alone” (Luke 9:33, 36) with unrivaled glory. So here, the new covenant Christian is alone with Jesus, “beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord.” As a result of this faith perception, spiritual osmosis takes place so that we “are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (II Cor. 3:18). Clearly the believer is to gaze at one transforming mirror, not two.

For the Christian who desires to be like His Master, why should he ever seek the assistance of Moses when the writer of Hebrews tells us that the ground

of Christian sanctification is “fixing our eyes on Jesus” (Heb. 12:2), He who is the embodiment of God’s righteousness, He who has established such a more effectual covenant? So Charles Wesley has written:

Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love and praise.