

IRONY IN JEREMIAH'S PROPHECY OF A NEW COVENANT

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Jeremiah 31 contains the promise of a new covenant, one of whose perplexing features is the nature of the new covenant, or more exactly, how it differs from other covenants. So soon as attention is given to each of the details stated by Jeremiah, our perplexity increases. Each of the items adduced is but a repetition of some familiar aspect of salvation already known in the Old Testament.

(1) The new covenant involves the spiritual apprehension of the law in the heart. This theme is already known from Deuteronomy 6:6, 7: "And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (RSV). It was a familiar note in devotional meditations, for example, Psalm 37:31: "The law of his God is in his heart; his steps do not slip" (RSV). The famous prophecy of Ezekiel touches the same theme in Ezekiel 36:26, 27: "A new heart will I give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances" (RSV). Hence this feature of the new covenant is not new.

(2) The new covenant involves God's becoming Israel's God and Israel's becoming His people. This is quite transparent as a quotation or echo of the foundation promise to Abraham, Genesis 17:7: "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you." So this feature of the new covenant is not new.

(3) The new covenant includes the full and complete forgiveness of sin, a doctrine so pervasive of the Old Testament as to need no formal proof. We need only note Exodus 34:6, 7—"The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgressions and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation."—and its echo in Psalm 103:8-12 to hear the clear note of forgiveness of sin. So even this climactic feature of the description of the new covenant is not new.

It becomes apparent that Jeremiah's purpose was not simply the

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comforting repetition of the essential features of spiritual religion, or even the wonderful promise of a time of blessing in the future. The open implication of the passage is that many in Jeremiah's day did not "know" the Lord, in contrast to the time when all would know Him. This is made even more clear by the amazing promise that in that future time it would no longer be necessary to plead with brother and neighbor to know the Lord, in contrast to the implied situation of Jeremiah's time, intimated in the "no longer" of verse 34—that because of the condition of the nation such evangelistic work was then needful. The implication is that Jeremiah and others were saying to their generation, "Know the Lord"; that is, "Experience the forgiveness of sin and the spiritual reality of the law written in the heart." That such was the condition of the nation is clear in Jeremiah's writings as well as in the historical books.

In such a situation, how is it relevant for Jeremiah to make a startling prediction of a new covenant? What could a "new covenant" mean to a people who were already God's people by an everlasting covenant? Thus the lines of Jeremiah's strategy for arousing complacent man-soul begin to appear. A new covenant was promised, but a new covenant whose features were only the simplicities of spiritual religion reiterated since Abraham. This situation suggests the psychological and literary rationale for Jeremiah's peculiar utterance about a new covenant. For a complacent person to hear that the law was to be known in the heart, that he should know the Lord, that sin could be forgiven, that Yahweh was his God and Israel His people—all this could leave the undiscerning and complacent in the same condition. These are the banalities preachers are supposed to utter: let's get on with the problems of defending the city. But for a man to be told, albeit with subtlety and indirection, that the basic matters of spiritual religion were foreign to him, that his experience of these realities would be as revolutionary and radical as a new covenant—this would tend to destroy complacency and bring conviction. For here the force of the irony—for such it is—is compressed, that the most simple, easily discernible and basic features of spiritual religion are said to be features of a *new* covenant, as if there could be or need be another covenant beside the one covenant made with Abraham and reiterated at Sinai.

Basic to the concept of irony as commonly defined is "a method of expression or a figure of speech in which the literal meaning of the words is the opposite of the thought in the speaker's mind and intended to be conveyed. . . ." (*New Century Dictionary*) So in Jeremiah's prophecy the very commonplaceness, the familiarity, the banality of the oft-repeated words all become the leverage to drive home the stinging irony of the words "new covenant"—all this "new" to complacent sinners who thought it was theirs all the while!

The probability that Jeremiah is using irony in chapter 31 is greatly strengthened by his use of irony elsewhere, and for that matter, the wide-

spread use of irony in the Old Testament, as expounded in the monograph of Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*. It is interesting to note that Good does not treat of the irony of Jeremiah, not denying its presence but rather reserving it for special treatment. He says: "Nor, have I expounded all the irony that the Old Testament holds. Perhaps the major gap is the omission of any treatment of the Book of Jeremiah." (p. 10)

Further confirmation of the fact that Jeremiah is using irony to convey rebuke is found in the way the theme of two covenants, apparently based on Jeremiah, is handled in the New Testament.

Probably the most transparent of these New Testament cases is found in Galatians 4:21ff. Already the note of irony is heard in Paul's words, "Tell me, you who desire to be under law..." Verse 24 brings the apparently straightforward statement, "These women are two covenants." However, in the subsequent development and contrast of the two covenants, Paul's irony becomes apparent. The one covenant corresponding to Sarah and leading on to mention of liberty, and climaxed by the quotation from Isaiah 54, is clearly the covenant of salvation by grace. By contrast, the mention of the other covenant with its accompaniments of slavery, and most pointedly the slavery of the "present Jerusalem," make it plain that Paul is equating this other covenant with the Christ-rejecting Judaism of his day. Now to call this latter situation a "covenant" is surely ironical for Paul. Paul certainly intends an emphatic rejection of it by his hearers. In the parabolic words "cast out the slave and her son..." Paul means to say that the specious appeal of legalism to Moses is not a real covenant, but is the very antithesis of it—a broken covenant, as Jeremiah phrased it.

The theme of two covenants emerges in II Corinthians 3:14-15. "But their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds..." Paul apparently does not mean by "old covenant" the volume of 24 books, *simpliciter*. He clearly means that Christ is in the Old Testament. In Romans 10:6-10, quoting Deuteronomy 30:12-13, Paul is careful to say that Moses' message is his message—"The word of faith which we preach." It is Moses as read with hardened mind and veiled heart which is called the "old covenant." "Old covenant" is a way to express what happens when unbelief reads the book. Clearly we are hearing Jeremiah's note of irony: the "old covenant" implied in Jeremiah's promise of a "new covenant" is Moses read with eyes which do not see Christ: the "new covenant" is not really "new"; it is only a true exegesis of Moses. The newness of the covenant is subjective and psychological: in Jeremiah's terms, it is the writing of the law on the heart. When the heart turns to the Lord, the veil is removed and the glories of salvation by grace shine on every page. Believers, beholding with unveiled face and heart, see the glory of Christ.

The remaining old and new covenant passages of the New Testament are found in Hebrews. Chapters eight and ten are focal points because here the original passage from Jeremiah is quoted.

Hebrews 8:8 gives a striking confirmation of the hypothesis of irony in Jeremiah, for the quotation is preceded by the statement that the prophet is "finding fault." How can the promise of a glorious new covenant be "finding fault?" I think the answer must be along the lines already suggested, that the very use of the word "new" in connection with familiar concepts would lead a complacent person to realize that he did not possess the spiritual reality. Further, the plain statement in chapter three of Hebrews that an earlier generation had broken the covenant by rebellion and unbelief as expounded in Psalm 95, points in the same direction. Hebrews sharply puts the contradictory, antithetical character of the two covenants: by speaking of a new covenant, the prophet made the other one "old." If the one is the well-known and -loved plan of salvation by grace, the other is the legalistic contradiction of it. In parallel with the contrasts already developed in the discussion of Jeremiah, Galatians and II Corinthians, it appears that the same contrast is intended in Hebrews. The contrast of old and new covenants, better promises and better hope, is irony, in exactly the spirit of Jeremiah and Paul.

Hebrews takes great pains to show that Christ is in the Old Testament, and that the Gospel came to Israel through Moses and David. In the presentation of the High Priest ranked with Melchizedek, there is presented the better hope through which believers of all ages draw near to God. Is there any other hope, or any other way? Plainly, the seeming postulation of another hope, other promises implied in the use of the comparative "better," is only the ironical contrast already seen in Galatians. The comparative "better," is the vehicle of the irony: there really is only one covenant of grace, and any other reading of Moses and the prophets is delusive and false.

This suggested interpretation of the problem of Hebrews is reasonable in the light of the known major problem of the apostolic age, namely, the conflict with legalism. At Galatia the issue of sacramentarianism—salvation by works of law—came to a focus in the problem of circumcision. One argument used by Paul was the ironical treatment of the contrast between Sarah and Hagar discussed above. The audience of Hebrews was apparently perplexed by the same sacramentarian question localized in the problem of priesthood and sacrifice. At Galatia, the issue was salvation by circumcision: for the Hebrews it was salvation by Levitical priesthood and sacrifice. In both cases, the strategy adopted is to affirm and prove the presence of the "new covenant" in Moses and the prophets. But a keen edge of spiritual discernment was needed to see this. To stimulate the minds of their hearers, the New Testament writers sharpened their exegesis with the paradox of newness which was not really new, adopted from the heartbroken irony of Jeremiah.