WHY WAS JEREMIAH'S NEW COVENANT NEW?

BY

JAMES SWETNAM

Rome

Jer. xxxi 31-34 is a text perennially cited by Old and New Testament scholars alike as well as by preachers of all persuasions, and it is particularly in vogue today because of its stress on interiority:

31 The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt; for they broke my covenant and I had to show myself their master, says the Lord. 33 But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God and they shall be my people. 34 No longer will they have need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the Lord. All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the Lord, for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more.

Stress is often put on the newness of the covenant which is announced. But when an attempt is made to specify in just what this newness consists viewpoints differ.

One approach to the problem of newness is to say that Jeremiah was speaking about the new covenant brought by Jesus Christ, i.e., the oracle was not verified until the coming of Christ more than five hundred years after the oracle was first uttered. Although it seems evident that the prophecy of Jeremiah is immediately relevant to the covenant of Christ (cf. the allusion in 1 Cor. xi 25 and Lk. xxii 20), this first approach does not seem a particularly happy one. The reason is that other texts of Jeremiah which use ideas and language similar to those found in Jer. xxxi 31-34 refer to events at the time of the return from the Exile.

3) Cf. Jer. xxiv 4-7 and xxxii 37-41.
A more common approach toward specifying the newness of Jeremiah’s new covenant is to say that it is new in the sense that the manner in which the covenant contents are communicated is new 1). This is simply a corollary of the view that the covenant which Jeremiah is speaking about is the Mosaic covenant 2): if the content is not new, the manner in which that content is presented must be 3).

The present note explores the newness of the new covenant along the lines of newness of manner in presentation and not of newness in content.

The text itself indicates the manner in which the new covenant will operate: it puts emphasis on interiority (“I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts”). A preliminary indication of how this interiority is to be understood comes from the immediate context, for the prophecy goes on to say that “all, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the Lord”. And how are they to know the Lord? “No longer will they have need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know the Lord”. Interiority is thus understood as implying a direct contact between the covenant and the individual. This is a veiled but unmistakable reference to the shortcomings of

1) “In Zukunft ... will Jahwe einen neuen Bund mit dem Volk aufrichten. Das bezieht sich nicht auf seinen Inhalt, denn der bleibt derselbe (tvry 33a) and setzt sich aus denselben beiden Stücken zusammen wie der alte: Jahwe Israels Gott, Israel Jahwes Volk (33b); das alte Mosegesetz ist unverbrüchlich sowohl in der Verheissung des göttlichen Schutzes als auch in der Forderung des Gehorsams, der Erfüllung des göttlichen Willens. Neu aber ist daran, dass nun eben diesen letztere restlos verwirklicht und damit die Bitte von 31:18b erfüllt werden wird: alle ohne Ausnahme werden die da'at Jahwe, die rechte Gotteserkenntnis besitzen (34b, vgl. Jes. 11:9; 54:13) ...” (W. Rudolph, Jeremiah², HAT. Erste Reihe 12, Tübingen 1958, pp. 184-85).


3) “On s’est parfois demandé à quelle première alliance l’hagiographe fait allusion. S’agirait-il par exemple d’un pacte conclu au moment même du départ de l’Egypte? Ou importe-t-il d’identifier sans plus la première alliance avec celle de Sinai? La réponse ne nous parait pas douteuse. Rien ne nous invite à ne pas songer au pacte sinaïtique. En particulier, la mention de l’écriture sur le cœur se comprend le mieux si elle s’énonce en opposition à la loi du Sinai sculptée sur des tables de pierre” (Coppens, art. cit., p. 15). The thesis of the present note is that the “first covenant” is not simply the Sinai covenant which was written on tablets of stone but the Sinai covenant insofar as it was written on tablets of stone and remote from immediate contact with the individual Israelite.