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**JEREMIAH 31:31-34: A COVENANT FOR CHILDREN - EXPLORING THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS IN THE ISRAELI-PALESTINE CONFLICT**

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ABSTRACT



The passage from Jeremiah 31:31-34 is a significant and well-known text within the Book of Jeremiah, discussing the establishment of a new covenant by God with the houses of Israel and Judah. Through the lens of an allegorical covenant relationship, the essay offers insights into the responsibilities incumbent upon all parties involved, especially in safeguarding the well-being and future of children affected by geopolitical struggles. The examination extends beyond mere textual analysis, connecting the covenantal promises with the historical context of the Babylonian exile and addressing contemporary implications, such as the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict.

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## Introduction

The passage from Jeremiah 31:31-34 discusses the establishment of a new covenant by God with the houses of Israel and Judah. This covenant is contrasted with the previous one made at Sinai, emphasizing a transformative shift from an external, written law to an internal, heart-centred relationship with God.<sup>1</sup> The examination extends beyond mere textual analysis, connecting the covenantal promises with the historical context of the Babylonian exile and addressing contemporary implications, such as the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict.

## Hebrew Translation

הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְכָרַתִּי אֶת־בְּרִית יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת־בְּרִית יְהוּדָה בְּרִית חֲדָשָׁה

31 Behold the days are coming says Yahweh and when I will make with the house of Israel and with house of Judah a new covenant.

לֹא כַבְרִית אֲשֶׁר כָּרַתִּי אֶת־אֲבוֹתָם בְּיוֹם הַחֲזִיקִי בְיָדָם לְהוֹצִיאָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר־הִרְמָה הִפְרוּ אֶת־בְּרִיתִי וְאֲנֹכִי בָעַלְתִּי בָם נְאֻם־יְהוָה

32 Not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by their hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt which they broke my covenant and though I was a husband to them says Yahweh.

כִּי נָאֵת הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר אֶכְרַת אֶת־בְּרִית יִשְׂרָאֵל אַחֲרַי הַיָּמִים הֵהֱם נְאֻם־יְהוָה נָתַתִּי אֶת־תּוֹרָתִי בְּקַרְבָּם וְעַל־לִבָּם אֶכְתַּבְנָה וְהָיִיתִי לָהֶם לְאֱלֹהִים וְהָיָה יְהוָה לֵעָם

33 But this covenant that I will make with the house of Israel thereafter those days says Yahweh I will put them my law in their minds and on their hearts, I will write it and I will be to them as God and they will be to me as people.

וְלֹא יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד אִישׁ אֶת־רֵעֵהוּ וְאִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו לֵאמֹר דַּעוּ אֶת־יְהוָה כִּי־כֹלְכֶם יָדַעוּ אוֹתִי לְמַקְטָנָם וְעַד־גְּדוֹלְכֶם נְאֻם־יְהוָה כִּי אֶסְלַח לְעֹנְוֵם וְלַחַטָּאתָם לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶנּוּ

34 And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying know Yahweh for they shall all know me from the least of them and to the greatest of them says Yahweh for I will forgive their iniquity and their sin I will remember no more.

<sup>1</sup> John M. Bracke. *Jeremiah 30-52 and Lamentations* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 21-24.



### **Comparison with Septuagint**

This passage exhibits the distinctive prose style typical of the book of Jeremiah, likely originating from a Deuteronomic author. The recurring phrase “I will be to them as God and they will be to me as people” in verse 33 is a frequent motif found in 7:23, 11:4, 24:7, and 32:38. There’s a possibility that it is a secondary addition in 30:22, where the Septuagint omits it. The idea of the law residing in Israel’s heart echoes Deuteronomy 6:6 and 30:14, closely resembling the essence of Deuteronomy 30:6.<sup>2</sup> Notably, the quotations from Jeremiah 31:31-34 in Hebrews 8:8-12 and 10:16 reflect renditions characteristic of Jer-R.<sup>3</sup> In Heb 8:11= Jer 31:33, the Greek word “polites” is infrequent in the Septuagint, making its occurrence in Jer b noteworthy, although “plaesion” is more common in Jer b than “polites.”<sup>4</sup> In Heb 8:9= Jer 31:32, the Greek translation of “en hemera epiboulomenou mou” presents challenges. Jer-OG rendered it differently, including a relative pronoun not found in the Hebrew. The closest Greek translation possibly aligns with genitive abstract or particular conjunctive. Additionally, agreements in the same verses between Jeremiah and Hebrews suggest that the author of Hebrews was familiar with the pretext of Jer-R.<sup>5</sup>

### **Where does the text fit in?**

In the initial chapters of Jeremiah (1-29), the people incur a covenant curse through their disobedience, leading to God’s judgment. Verses 31-34 anticipate a future time when God will establish a “new covenant” with the people. The distinctive aspect of this new covenant is its contrast with the old one - while the old covenant was inscribed on stone tablets, the new covenant is personally inscribed by God on the hearts of the people.<sup>6</sup> The focus of Jeremiah 1-29 centres on understanding the reasons behind God’s judgment. Jeremiah accuses Judah and Israel, asserting that they have chosen not to know God. In the book of Jeremiah, “knowledge” isn’t merely intellectual discernment but entails a deeper understanding achieved through obedience and devotion. However, as the people fail in this regard, Jeremiah 31:31-34 introduces the prospect of God establishing a new covenant to

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<sup>2</sup> Ernst W. Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapter 26-52* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 71.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Tov, *The Septuagint Translation of Jeremiah and Baruch, a Discussion of an Early Revision of the LXX of Jeremiah 29-52 and Baruch 1:1-3:8* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975), 166.

<sup>4</sup> Tov, *The Septuagint Translation of Jeremiah and Baruch...*, 65.

<sup>5</sup> Tov, *The Septuagint Translation of Jeremiah and Baruch...*, 100.

<sup>6</sup> Bracke, *Jeremiah 30-52 and Lamentations...*, 21.



address the heart-related issues, aiming for a renewed knowledge of God among all. This promise, rooted in the historical context of the Babylonian exile (587 BCE), reflects God's judgment and the assurance of a new covenant. Importantly, this new covenant signifies a new beginning offered by God after the Babylonian exile.<sup>7</sup> It's crucial to note that this promise is initially directed not to Christians through Jesus but to the Jewish survivors of the Babylonian exile.

## Form

Isaiah and Jeremiah are characterized by a blend of poetry and prose, with these forms often intertwining or interrupting one another. The content of these books frequently lacks a discernible order or arrangement, making interpretation challenging due to the absence of contextualizing information. Describing these works as a "book" might be misleading, as they are better understood as a compilation of diverse writings. A more accurate depiction would be a miscellany of disparate materials, presenting a confused jumble or medley.<sup>8</sup> While this categorization lacks a certain technical sophistication, it aptly captures the nature of these collections. Breaking down the 52 chapters into their constituent parts reveals a series of independent elements rather than a cohesive narrative.

## Redaction

The structure of the book can be delineated into four parts: Part 1 (2-25), Part 2 (25:15-38, 46-51), Part 3 (26-36), and Part 4 (37-45). Part 3, specifically, comprises two collections, namely 27-29 and 30-31, with additional material in the form of appendices found in 32 and 33.<sup>9</sup> Despite the diversity of these components, they are amalgamated into a cohesive whole, forming a comprehensive book. This compilation is unified by a redactional framework that attributes the individual parts to the work of Jeremiah, establishing a Jeremiah tradition. The twentieth-century biblical scholarship landscape is rife with various speculative theories concerning the origins and editing of Jeremiah, adding layers of complexity to its interpretation.

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<sup>7</sup> Bracke, *Jeremiah 30-52 and Lamentations...*, 24.

<sup>8</sup> Robert P. Carroll, *The Old Testament Library, Jeremiah, A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 38.

<sup>9</sup> Carroll, *The Old Testament Library...*, 38.



### **Canonical and Traditional History**

The poetry and prose sections in Jeremiah can be attributed to three primary strands: the poems of Jeremiah, the book of Baruch, which serves as Jeremiah's biography, and additional supplements appended to these writings by later authors.<sup>10</sup> The prevailing feature in Jeremiah is the subsequent augmentation of Jeremiah's poetry and Baruch's biography, reflecting the conceptualization of Jeremiah as a preacher through the utilization of Midrash and prophetic legend.

### **Sources**

Mowinckel identifies four sources labelled A, B, C, and D, attributing specific redactors to each source. The fourth source, D, is recognized as a later collection inserted into the book, primarily comprising oracles in 30-31 that envision a positive future for the people. Within this source, there are several later additions, such as 31:29-40 and 33. Notably, the dating of source D remains indeterminate.<sup>11</sup> The study of Jeremiah is better approached through an examination of levels of traditions rather than strict categorization into discrete sources.

### **Criticism**

Jeremiah's prophecy stands as a self-contained entity, yet it is evident that his vision is a product of personal experience. The exact wording may appear awkward, possibly indicating the influence of another author.<sup>12</sup> The inclusion of the term 'house of Judah' seems redundant as it is encompassed by the phrase 'the house of Israel,' and the repetition of 'my covenant' comes across as intrusive. Additionally, among the four instances of 'says the Lord,' eliminating two could enhance the clarity of the text.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the authenticity of the prophecy remains unmistakable as it effectively encapsulates and advances a crucial aspect of Jeremiah's teachings.

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<sup>10</sup> Carroll, *The Old Testament Library...*, 39.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed information see Mowinckel's identification of four sources in Carroll, *The Old Testament Library...*, 39-40.

<sup>12</sup> H Cunliffe-Jones, *Jeremiah, God in History* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1974),197.

<sup>13</sup> Cunliffe-Jones, *Jeremiah, God in History...*, 198.



### **New Literary Critical Methods**

There is ongoing debate concerning the relationship between the poetry and prose in Jeremiah, particularly in the context of Source C or the Deuteronomistic level of tradition.<sup>14</sup> This aspect is a significant focal point in modern scholarship, creating divisions among scholars as they assess the nature and extent of the Deuteronomistic influence in shaping the book of Jeremiah. Some contend that the involvement of Deuteronomistic elements in the book is primarily editorial, resulting in a Deuteronomistic edition of Jeremiah where he is portrayed as a prophet aligning with the outlook of that school.<sup>15</sup> This perspective, however, has introduced distortions in the portrayal of Jeremiah and has added complexity to the task of uncovering the historical Jeremiah.

### **Hermeneutical Key**

The covenant can be understood metaphorically, either as a marital union or a parent-child relationship between God and His people. Consequently, the hermeneutical approach employed for interpreting this new covenant passage involves an allegorical interpretation, wherein God is perceived to establish a covenant relationship with His children, symbolizing the future church within our society.

### **Setting**

The backdrop to the proclamation of a new covenant is undoubtedly the covenant believed to have been established between God and Israel at Sinai. Essential to this covenant and its continuity was Israel's adherence to the laws prescribed within it.<sup>16</sup> Failure to comply with these covenant laws would lead to divine judgment on the nation, as detailed in the extensive list of curses in Deuteronomy for disobedience. The Deuteronomistic history chronicles how, throughout the centuries, Israel consistently fell short of living in accordance with the covenant's terms, resulting in judgments, first on the northern kingdom in 722 B.C. and eventually on Judah in 587 BCE.<sup>17</sup> At the heart of this matter, and crucial to Israel's existence as God's people, was the issue of obedience to the law. Reflecting on Israel's history, it becomes apparent that the nation not only refused to obey the law but, more significantly,

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<sup>14</sup> Carroll, *The Old Testament Library...*, 40.

<sup>15</sup> Carroll, *The Old Testament Library...*, 41.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah...*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah...*, 70.



was fundamentally incapable of doing so. This realization precipitated one of the most profound crises in Israel's faith.

### Structure

The internal structure of the text is of significance, indirectly influencing considerations of authenticity. The first half (31-33a) adopts a prose format, while the second half (33a-34) transitions into poetry; however, both segments are meticulously organized.<sup>18</sup> The initial half, strongly reminiscent of Deuteronomy, follows a chiasmic arrangement. Conversely, the second half commences and concludes with two bicola, each containing a pair of first-person singular verbs, creating a chiasmus in terms of verbs and prepositional complements. The opening bicolon extends into the second bicolon, which contains the covenantal formula featuring a first-person singular verb and a third-person plural verb. Regarding its placement, this segment lies outside the framework of the recension to the south but maintains connections through various catchwords and phrases.<sup>19</sup>

1. The phrase "the time is surely coming" serves as a frame for the recension, marking the commencement of the present passage and absent in intervening material. The mention of the "house of Israel" and the "house of Judah" is similarly linked to verse 27.
2. The covenant formula in verse 33 exhibits a variation of the formula found in 31:1 and 9b.
3. Notably, the term "new" is feminine in 31 and remains the same in verse 22. This adjective is absent elsewhere in Jeremiah.
4. There is a possibility that the theme of inscribing the law on the hearts of the people reflects the command to write the words of Yahweh in 30:2.
5. The use of the verb "be master" corresponds to its occurrence in that verse. Consequently, the passage is intricately integrated with the recension to the south and emerges as a substantial supplement to that recension, introducing themes closely related to it.

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<sup>18</sup> William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2, A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, chapters 26-52* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 164.

<sup>19</sup> Holladay, *Jeremiah 2...*, 165.



### Important Words and Phrases

Within the rich tapestry of Jeremiah 31:31-34, certain words and phrases emerge as pivotal elements, each carrying profound significance and contributing to the overarching narrative.<sup>20</sup>

1. “Behold, the days are coming” - This prophetic statement is eschatological and can only find fulfilment in the ultimate kingdom of God. It’s crucial to consider this in connection with the New Testament.
2. “Covenant” - The term “covenant” in verse 31 signifies a new covenant distinct from the old covenant with Israel. It is a collective covenant, and Jeremiah doesn’t juxtapose the communal and individual aspects of faith.
3. “Not like the Covenant” - The Mosaic covenant, despite being broken by the sins of God’s people, remains in effect due to God’s enduring love and faithfulness. The disjunction in Hebrew idiom is versatile, conveying both comparison and alternative meanings. The advent of the new covenant in Christ supersedes the Mosaic covenant, transcending it and advancing forward. It represents a new covenant in the context of Jeremiah’s vision of deliverance from exile (23:7-8).

### Interpretation

#### Verse 31

This commitment entails the establishment of a new covenant - a fresh relationship initiated, given, and solidified by God. Its bestowal is not contingent on any rationale or explanation but emanates from God’s intrinsic resolution to foster this renewed connection.<sup>21</sup> The recipients of this divine pact are the communities of Israel and Judah, and the crux of the contrast between the old and new covenants lies in the manner of their reception.

#### Verse 32

A discernible pattern emerges as Judah fails to uphold its end of the agreement, prompting God’s decision to reject them. Jeremiah accentuates the universal knowledge of God,

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<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed information on the important words and phrases, see H Cunliffe-Jones, *Jeremiah, God in History*, 198.

<sup>21</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah, Exile and Homecoming* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 293.



extending from the least to the greatest. Despite the unfaithfulness of Judah, the situation will undergo transformation, especially with the return and consolidation of Ephraim.<sup>22</sup> The fulfilment of the law remains an essential requirement of God, forming the basis on which He has covenanted with His people.

**Verse 33**

Jeremiah, throughout his discourse, delves into the persistent wickedness of the human heart, underscoring its untrustworthy nature. Sin is depicted as deeply ingrained within.<sup>23</sup> Recognizing the inadequacy of external influences to conquer the innate human inclination towards disobedience, Jeremiah emphasizes that intimate knowledge of God must prevail in human life. This knowledge becomes the internal response to the covenant, rooted in God's redemption.

**Verse 34**

Contrary to an individualistic approach, the passage emphasizes participation within the covenant with Israel. It envisions a scenario where the experience of standing in the council of God and listening to Him becomes a shared reality for every Israelite.<sup>24</sup> In this envisioned future, no one will need to instruct another about the firsthand experience of God, as it will serve as the foundational aspect of their lives.<sup>25</sup> This shared experience emanates from a complete and genuine response to God's forgiveness.

**Theological Thrust**

The covenant, as provided, guides the shaping of the community in response to God.<sup>26</sup> Jeremiah provides assurance that God Himself will actively participate in creating a new covenant for and with His people, as articulated in 31:31-34.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Elmer A. Leslie, *Jeremiah, Chronologically arranged, translated and interpreted* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), 106.

<sup>23</sup> Cunliffe-Jones, *Jeremiah...*, 198.

<sup>24</sup> Cunliffe-Jones, *Jeremiah...*, 198.

<sup>25</sup> Cunliffe-Jones, *Jeremiah...*, 199.

<sup>26</sup> Bracke, *Jeremiah 30-52 and Lamentations...*, 23.

<sup>27</sup> Leslie, *Jeremiah, Chronologically arranged*, 106.

**Main Theme**

The passage on the new covenant heralds God's gracious initiative to bring about a transformative change in the inner nature of God's people. This change aims to replace their previous failures in obeying God's laws with both the will and the ability to do so.<sup>28</sup> God promises to inscribe the law within them and embed it in their hearts, ensuring that everyone will have an intimate knowledge of God.

**Contextual Relevance**

In the context of the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict, the thematic elements of disobedience, covenant curses, and the promise of a new covenant in Jeremiah 1-29 can be analysed to draw parallels with the present situation of children in the region. Much like the people in Jeremiah's time facing the consequences of covenant curses due to disobedience, the children in the Israel-Palestine conflict are often the innocent victims of a complex geopolitical struggle. The impact of conflict on children, with its attendant hardships, loss, and trauma, mirrors the consequences faced by the people in Jeremiah's narrative. The promise of a new covenant in Jeremiah, with its emphasis on a transformative change in inner nature and a deep, intimate connection with God, offers a lens through which to consider the well-being and future of the children affected by the current conflict. The allegorical interpretation of the covenant as a parent-child relationship or a marital bond underscores the importance of nurturing, protection, and care for the vulnerable, including children.

Examining the present situation through the hermeneutical key of an allegorical covenant relationship encourages reflection on the responsibilities of all parties involved to ensure the welfare, security, and, ultimately, the flourishing of the younger generation amidst the challenges of the conflict. The historical context and theological thrust of Jeremiah's message provide a backdrop for contemplating the ethical dimensions and potential pathways toward a more just and compassionate resolution to the complex issues faced by children in the Israel-Palestine conflict.

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<sup>28</sup> Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah...*, 71.

**Conclusion**

Jeremiah's prophetic vision of a new covenant stands as a beacon of hope in the midst of historical upheavals and divine judgments. The intricate interplay of language, literary styles, and historical context enriches our understanding of this pivotal passage. The thematic thread of disobedience, covenant curses, and the promise of renewal resonates not only in the historical narrative but also finds echoes in the complexities of contemporary conflicts, such as the Israel-Palestine situation. The allegorical interpretation of the covenant as a parent-child relationship or a marital bond invites reflection on the ethical dimensions of our responsibilities, particularly concerning the vulnerable, symbolized by children in conflict zones. Jeremiah's words beckon us to consider the transformative power of a covenant that goes beyond legalistic adherence to laws, aiming for a profound internal change and an intimate knowledge of the Divine. Thus we see the enduring relevance of Jeremiah 31:31-34, bridging the gap between ancient prophecies and the pressing challenges of our time.

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