

## Interpreting the New Covenant in Light of Its Multiplexity, Multitextuality, and Ethnospecificity

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I have had the privilege of teaching a seminary course on NT theology every year for over two decades, and a course on advanced NT theology for almost as long (though less frequently). Mark Saucy's reflection vividly captures my own observation of the field in that time:

It is one of the stunning ironies of academic biblical theology that the entity for which the New Testament corpus is named [viz., the New Covenant] receives so little attention in understanding the New Testament's theology.<sup>2</sup>

A glance at the index of almost any NT theology text bears out this assessment. Tom Schreiner includes a few references to Jeremiah 31:31–34 but no reference to anything past 31:34<sup>3</sup> and no discussion of the New Covenant.<sup>4</sup> Ditto Frank Thielman,<sup>5</sup> Donald Guthrie,<sup>6</sup> and Leon Morris.<sup>7</sup> I. Howard Marshall includes no reference whatsoever to Jeremiah 31.<sup>8</sup> This is, to me, nothing short of astonishing.<sup>9</sup>

The New Testament<sup>10</sup> is *named* for the New Covenant because it records—according to Jesus' announcement (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25), Paul's teaching (2 Cor 3:6), and the letter to the Hebrews

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Saucy, "Israel as a Necessary Theme in Biblical Theology," in *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel*, ed. Darrell Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 174.

<sup>3</sup> This article will discuss the significance of this specific datum, and the fact that there are, of course, many other OT New Covenant passages besides Jeremiah 31.

<sup>4</sup> *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981).

<sup>7</sup> *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Not technically of the NT theology genre, G. K. Beale's *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011) includes several references to the New Covenant and to Jeremiah 31:31–34 but, again, nothing beyond 31:34. Even premillennial NT theology texts (e.g., Ryrie, Ladd, Zuck and Bock) fare little better.

<sup>10</sup> "Testament" derives from *testamentum*, used in the Latin Bible to differentiate the *Vetus Testamentum* from the *Novum Testamentum*, following earlier Greek Bibles which divided into the *Palaia Diatheke* and the *Kainē Diatheke*. In the LXX, *diatheke* translates the Hebrew *berith*. The Latin-based "testament" is an unhelpful designation because in modern western parlance it typically conveys the idea of a will, a connotation which *diatheke* rarely if ever bears. "Old Covenant" and "New Covenant" would be more suitable labels for the two divisions of our Bible—i.e., the "Revelation of God under the Old [Mosaic] Covenant" and the "Revelation of God under the New Covenant."

(8:13; 9:15; 12:24)—the inauguration of that New Covenant.<sup>11</sup> Despite ongoing debate among dispensationalists, this seems to have been the prevailing dispensational view at least as far back as Pentecost's *Things to Come*.<sup>12</sup> If the very designation “New Testament” signifies the inauguration of the New Covenant, then the theology of the NT cannot be accurately viewed or adequately explained without reference to the New Covenant. Consequently, to write a book dedicated to NT theology that never discusses the concept, passages, provisions, or theology of the New Covenant—on its own terms and in its original context—seems theologically and hermeneutically myopic.

The New Covenant is God's consummate covenantal arrangement, “the sum of God's story to its end, including the destinies of Israel, the nations, and even the cosmos itself.”<sup>13</sup> Understanding the New Covenant contextually and exegetically, therefore, is basic to grasping the storyline, the theology, and the very structure of the Bible—let alone NT theology.

It is my contention that *the New Covenant is a multidimensional prophetic covenant [multiplexity] made explicitly with Israel in multiple passages [multitextuality] and consisting of mostly Israel-specific promises [ethnospecificity] that are most satisfactorily interpreted and fulfilled via a dispensational hermeneutic*. On the face of it, this thesis sounds remarkably pedestrian. The accent in this presentation, however, falls primarily on the multiplexity of the New Covenant (and the short-sightedness of treating Jer 31:31–34 as the New Covenant *in toto*), and secondarily on a constellation of specific hermeneutical observations suggesting the weaknesses of a non-dispensational explanation of the New Covenant.

The term *multitextuality* however, raises a preliminary issue that can be addressed here only briefly. Since the term *new covenant* occurs only once in the OT (Jer 31:31), how are we to determine which other passages, if any, also describe the New Covenant.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the only covenants actually “named” in the biblical text itself are the “old covenant” (2 Cor 3:14) and the “new covenant” (Jer 31:31; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24). To all the other covenants, theological discussion attaches descriptors suggested by the context (e.g., Abrahamic, Sinaitic/Mosaic, Davidic). The term *covenant* is often absent from passages that are obviously extensions of specific covenants, even though they are not explicitly designated as such. For example, the term *covenant* is never mentioned in the narrative of Abraham until Genesis 15:18, but no one doubts that Genesis

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<sup>11</sup> I am well aware that some of my dispensational colleagues dispute this assessment of these and other NT statements. Cf. Mike Stallard, ed., *Dispensational Understanding of the New Covenant* (Schaumburg: Regular Baptist, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> In 1958, Dwight Pentecost (*Things to Come* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958], 121–25) outlined three premillennial views: (1) two new covenants, one for Israel and one for the church (Chafer's view), (2) one new covenant for Israel only (Darby's view), and (3) “one new covenant with a two-fold application, one to Israel in the future and one to the church in the present,” which, Pentecost observes, “is more generally held than Darby's view.” View (1) appears to have always been very much a minority view with apparently few to no modern advocates because, given the biblical data, “this view cannot be sustained” (Bruce Compton, “Epilogue: Dispensationalism, the Church, and the New Covenant,” in Stallard, 269).

<sup>13</sup> Saucy, 174.

<sup>14</sup> E.g., John Masters writes, “I use the term [new covenant], just as the Old Testament does, of a singular text, Jeremiah 31:31–34” (“Foreword,” in Stallard, 20). Even this delineation seems exegetically short-sighted, however, since that covenantal expression flows directly into the divine oath that secures that covenant (31:35–37) which, in turn, flows unbrokenly into additional promises (31:38–40). Hermeneutically, there is no reason not to take 31:31–40 as the initial New Covenant unit. Why stop at 31:34?

12:1–3, 13:14–17, 15:4–5, or 15:7–17 constitute components of the Abrahamic covenant. Likewise, subsequent passages that omit the term *covenant* are rightly understood to be restatements or extensions of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 22:15–18; 26:2–5; 28:13–15, etc.). In short, passages that reiterate covenantal language and/or the same promissory components are rightly adduced as extensions of that same covenant and may even expand on the original covenantal components. That is not to say that the resulting list of New Covenant passages (including the one proposed below) is beyond dispute.<sup>15</sup> Historical and eschatological prophecies are often interwoven into the same passage, so a degree of subjectivity is unavoidable.

### *The Anticipation of the New Covenant*

The designation *new covenant* does not occur until relatively near the chronological close of the OT era (Jer 31:31). Yet Moses intimated the need for a new covenant even before the ink was dry on the old one. Deuteronomy 29:20–29 reads as if Israel’s failure and judgment under the terms of the Sinaitic Covenant are a foregone conclusion. The reference to their future captivity and restoration in 30:1–5 reads just as matter-of-factly. The next statement, however, far exceeds any provisions included in the Sinaitic Covenant: “And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants to love the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul, that you may live” (Deut 30:6).<sup>16</sup>

This is the earliest explicit proleptic reference to a New Covenant provision.<sup>17</sup> The Old Covenant<sup>18</sup> made demands from the outside in; there were no provisions in the Old Covenant for such gracious, internal transformation as this statement describes. It is left to three prophets some seven centuries later, however, to fill out the bulk of the provisions of this New Covenant in detail. Table 1 lists the major extended OT passages on the New Covenant, including the identifying phrase in each.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For a further discussion of various models for how to identify New Covenant passages in the OT, see Dave Fredrickson, “Which are the New Covenant Passages in the Bible?” in Stallard, 29–72. For a chart summarizing different identifications of OT New Covenant passages, see Appendix 1 below.

<sup>16</sup> Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations reflect the New King James Version. All emphasis in Bible quotations has been added; for the sake of clarity, original italics for supplied words have been removed.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Jer 32:39–40; Ezek 11:19–20; 36:26–27. See Appendix 2 for a comparative chart of parallel language between Deut 30 and Ezek 36–37.

<sup>18</sup> The Sinaitic or Mosaic Covenant came to be known as the “old” or “first” covenant by way of contrast to the New Covenant and its inauguration announced in passages such as 2 Corinthians 3:14 and Hebrews 8:13.

<sup>19</sup> I urge readers, as I assign my students, to take one hour and read straight through at least these New Covenant passages. Everything I say in this paper hangs on the language of these passages. The more familiar you are with these texts from a first-hand contextual reading of them (rather than second-hand systematic theological assumptions), the better you will be able to assess what follows. Nothing has been so persuasive or formative to my own thinking on the New Covenant as reading these multiple, major passages on the same topic; collected into one reading, they reinforce each other and shed light on one another.

**Table 1. Major OT Passages on the New Covenant**

Book	Passage	Covenantal Designation	Reference
Jeremiah	31:31–40	“new covenant” made with “the house of Israel and the house of Judah”	31:31
	32:36–44 <sup>20</sup>	“everlasting covenant”	32:40
	33:14–26	“that good word that I have promised to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah”	cf. 31:31ff; 32:39–42
Ezekiel	16:60–63	“everlasting covenant”	16:60
	34:11–31	“covenant of peace”	34:25
	36:16–38	no explicit covenant reference but identical covenantal descriptions	cf. Jer 31:34; 32:37–41
	37:15–28	“covenant of peace”; “everlasting covenant”	37:26
Isaiah	54:1–17	“covenant of peace”	54:10
	55:1–13	“everlasting covenant”	55:3
	59:20–62:12	covenant described in eternal terms; “everlasting covenant”	59:21 61:8

Many other passages, of course, corroborate the details of the New Covenant.<sup>21</sup> I have limited this list, however, to extended contextual units that explicitly refer to the “covenant.”<sup>22</sup>

### *The Contents of the New Covenant*

A detailed reading of the above passages reveals that the New Covenant is far more comprehensive and meticulous than many theological treatments of it—both covenantal and dispensational. While the New Covenant and the gospel overlap significantly, it is an oversimplification to equate them as coextensive. The New Covenant highlights certain gospel realities that are available universally in conjunction with the first coming of Christ (the Mediator of the New Covenant, Heb 9:15; 12:24) and become the core of NT revelation. But most of the components of the New Covenant lie dormant until the second coming of that Mediator.

Apart from systematic-theological fiat, it is exegetically inviable to sever the soteriological dimensions of the New Covenant from the Israel-specific and land-related promises that are interwoven into the warp and woof of that covenant. This is so for two reasons. The first is the most obvious: the New Covenant was made expressly “with the house of Israel and with the house of

<sup>20</sup> For a justification for including Jeremiah 33 as a New Covenant passage, see Appendix 1.

<sup>21</sup> E.g., Ezek 11:14–20; Zeph 3:1–20; Zech 12–14; et al. As is frequent in prophecy, some of these passages interface current events and future prediction (blending near and distant fulfillment). For instance, even though Jeremiah 31–33 toggles back and forth between the New Covenant promises of eschatological regathering, restoration, and rebuilding and the historical promises of regathering, restoration, and rebuilding after the Babylonian captivity, the latter lie in the shadow cast by the looming and distant assurances of the New Covenant. The smaller and more immediate events foreshadow the larger, later, and lasting fulfillment. Just as Manasseh’s wickedness, captivity, repentance, and return from Babylon (2 Chr 33) were a prophetic prefigure of Judah’s experience on the national level, the nation’s exile and return from Babylon was a microcosm of the eschatological regathering and restoration under the New Covenant.

<sup>22</sup> The only exceptions are Jeremiah 33, on which see note 14 above, and Ezekiel 36, which is an extended passage with far too much New Covenant language to omit. The parallels between Ezekiel 36 and Deuteronomy 30 are such a striking confirmation of Deuteronomy’s anticipation of the New Covenant that I have included a comparative chart of those two passages (Appendix 2).

Judah” (Jer 31:31; 33:14), that is, with “the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Jer 33:26)—the most unambiguous designations imaginable for national Israel and ethnic Jews.<sup>23</sup> Second, God solemnized this covenant with those recipients by multiple sworn oaths<sup>24</sup> (more on that below).

The ubiquitous assumption—on the part of both covenantalists and dispensationalists—that Jeremiah 31:31–34 *is the* New Covenant is, in my opinion, unfortunate and misleading. Functionally, this passage is much more akin to a preamble that introduces and briefly summarizes but does not remotely exhaust the detailed terms of the New Covenant. Some treat the seventy-three (Hebrew) words of Jeremiah 31:31–34 as the comprehensive expression of the New Covenant while virtually ignoring the approximately two dozen individual components of the New Covenant enumerated in multiple additional New Covenant passages. Such a truncated view of the New Covenant is as mistaken as treating the fifty-two opening words of the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution as the comprehensive expression of that document while dismissing its seven articles and twenty-seven amendments as symbolic window-dressing.<sup>25</sup> Or, to offer a biblical analogy, saying that Jeremiah 31:31–34 is “the” New Covenant is a bit like saying Isaiah 61:1–3 is *the* OT’s description of the messianic mission.

Table 2 illustrates how multidimensional, multitextual, and ethnospecific the New Covenant is. I have tried to tie the wording of each provision tightly to the text(s) from which it is drawn. The idea of enumerating the components of the New Covenant is not new.<sup>26</sup> Two features make this chart significant, however. First, it spells out of the details of those components with specificity. Second, the light-gray shading distinguishes between soteriological components (all of which are cited or alluded to in the NT as present, active, literally realized, and universally extended) and ethnically grounded (Israel-specific) components (none of which are cited or alluded to in the NT as present, active, or universally extended). The comparison between these two classes of components will be the basis for raising a vital hermeneutical question that is right at the core of this paper: *If the soteriological components of the New Covenant are cited in the NT as present, active, and literally realized not only for NT Christians but also—according to not only dispensationalists but also an increasing number of non-dispensational interpreters—for a future widescale conversion of ethnic Israelites (Rom 11:26), then on what objective hermeneutical basis would we not also expect all the other components of the New Covenant (in fact, the vast majority of them) to be literally realized for ethnic Israelites?*

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<sup>23</sup> This seems painfully obvious to any dispensationalist, but that these same words clearly do not mean national Israel and ethnic Jews has historically been equally painfully obvious to covenant theologians such as Matthew Henry: “Observe who the persons are with whom this covenant is made—with the house of Israel and Judah, with the gospel Church, the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16), with the spiritual seed of believing Abraham and praying Jacob” (loc. cit.). Similarly, Vern Poythress: “With whom is the New Covenant made? It is made with Israel and Judah. Hence it is made with Christians by virtue of Christ the Israelite.” *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1994), 106.

<sup>24</sup> Jer 31:35–37; 33:19–26; Isa 54:9–10. In other words (to borrow the language of Heb 6:17–18), God not only affirmed “the immutability of his counsel” by expressing the promises of the New Covenant in multiple passages, but also “confirmed it by an oath”—comprising “two immutable things [his word and his oath], in which it is impossible for God to lie.” In addition to his divine oath, God frequently further guarantees his New Covenant promises with the language of certainty (e.g., Isa 55:5; 60:9; 62:8, 11).

<sup>25</sup> For a more detailed illustration of Jeremiah 31:31–34 as the “preamble” to the New Covenant, see Appendix 3.

<sup>26</sup> For example, see Pentecost 117, and Fredrickson 63, 68–69.

**Table 2. Components of the New Covenant**

#	Promise	Jeremiah	Ezekiel	Isaiah	Other
<b>Object:</b> “the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (Jer 31:31; 33:14), “the descendants of Jacob and David” (Jer 33:26), “the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Jer 33:26)					
1	God’s law will be internalized	31:33			
2	God’s Spirit will be internalized		36:27; 37:14		
3	God will be their God and they will be his people	31:33; 32:38; (cf. 24:7)	34:30–31; 36:28; 37:23, 27		Zech 8:8
4	a nationwide individual knowledge of God (?)	31:34 (cf. 31:1)		54:13	
5	iniquity forgiven and sin eternally forgotten / cleansing from sin	31:34	36:25, 33; 37:23		Zech 3:1–10; 13:1ff
6	divine oath certifies the eternal existence of Israel as God’s nation and covenant people	31:35–37; 33:23–26			
7	Jerusalem will be rebuilt, prosperous, and eternally secure	31:38–40; 33:16		60:1–62:12	
8	a universal regathering of Israel from all the nations	32:37; 33:26	36:24; 37:21; cf. 11:17	54:7	Deut 30:1–4; Zeph 3:20; Zech 8:8; 10:6–10
9	their permanent restoration to the land given to their fathers	32:37, 41	36:24, 28; 37:25; cf. 11:17	60:21	Deut 30:5; Jer 3:18; Amos 9:15
10	a sovereign, spiritual operation internally enabling them to obey and securing their loyalty to God forever	32:39–40 (cf. 24:7)	36:26–27; 37:23; cf. 11:19–20	59:21	Deut 30:6, 8
11	perpetual divine favor on Israel is sworn	32:40, 42		54:7–10; 62:3–5	
12	Israel will be known for its righteousness (from God)	33:16		54:17; 60:17, 21; 61:3, 10–11; 62:1–2, 7, 12	
13	perpetuity of Davidic line is sworn (with an oath)	33:17, 20–22			
14	perpetuity of Levitical line is sworn (with an oath)	33:18, 20–22			
15	Israel and Judah will be reunited into one nation		37:15–22		Jer 3:18
16	David will be established as their prince		34:23–24; 37:24–25		
17	a humbling remembrance of their past sin		16:61–63; 36:31–32		
18	Israel will be rebuilt, fruitful, and eternally secure		34:25–29; 36:29–30, 33–38	55:12–13; 61:4	Deut 30:9; Amos 9:13–14
19	international recognition of God’s unique blessing on Israel		36:23, 36; 37:28	61:9	
20	Israel’s international rejection and abuse will be forever reversed			54:14–17; 60:12, 14–15	Zeph 3:20
21	Jerusalem will be the center of international attention and worship			55:5; 60:1–62:12	Isa 2; Jer 3:17; Zech 8:22–23; 14:16–21
22	any nations who fail to honor Israel will be punished			60:12	Deut 30:7; Zech 14:12–14
23	God’s sanctuary will be in their midst forever		37:26–28		Zech 2:8–13
24	God will be their eternal light, overwhelming the sun and moon			60:19–20	Rev. 21:23; 22:5
<b>Motive:</b> the universal sanctification of God’s holy name (Ezek 36:21–23; cf. Matt 6:9) that he may be glorified (Isa 60:21; 61:3)					

## Soteriological Provisions of the New Covenant

The soteriological promises of the New Covenant (marked with light-gray shading in Table 2) inevitably receive all the theological attention and emphasis (#1–5, 10) precisely because these are the only components cited and paralleled in the NT. That fact alone is hermeneutically highly suggestive. God will put his laws and his Spirit in his people’s hearts,<sup>27</sup> transform them internally, grant forgiveness and deliverance from sins, and establish a permanent spiritual bond with them. These provisions find clear parallels in the NT. That means that only about twenty percent of the New Covenant’s components have any NT citation indicating that they are operative and applicable to NT believers.<sup>28</sup> The presence of those citations in the NT highlights the conspicuous absence of the majority of New Covenant promises that are never mentioned in the NT, let alone described as fulfilled.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, even the soteriological promises of the New Covenant are not merely individual in application<sup>30</sup> but repeatedly and explicitly *national* in scope. The New Covenant was made with Israel *as a nation* (Jer 31:31–32) and promises to be fulfilled in Israel *as a nation* (Jer 31:33–34),<sup>31</sup> because God swears with an oath that Israel will never “cease from being *a nation* before me forever” (31:35–37). The soteriological elements may be extended on an individual basis in any era; but the New Covenant ultimately anticipates fulfillment on a national scale (cf. Rom 11:26). Moreover, woven into the fabric of these soteriological promises are details that also point to a necessarily Jewish fulfillment.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> “Just as the New Covenant [in] Jeremiah promised the facilitation of obedience by the internalization of the law, so the New Covenant [in] Ezekiel would secure obedience through the presence of God’s Spirit in the heart.” Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 90. This difference in expression is consistent with the respective theological emphases in each prophet. Jeremiah mentions the “law” 12x (Ezekiel 4x); Ezekiel mentions the Holy “Spirit” 14x (Jeremiah 0x).

<sup>28</sup> I have marked #4 with a question mark because although it is cited once in the NT (Heb 8) specifically to (professing) Christian Jews, the closest the NT comes to applying it to the Church at large is a possible allusion in 1 John 2:27. So, while it is a soteriological provision, in its full sense it appears to be an Israel-specific soteriological provision. Cf. footnote 30 below.

<sup>29</sup> G. K. Beale attempts to demonstrate the inaugural fulfillment of the land promises in the NT (756–72). Despite valiant exegetical effort on eight major passages to prove that thesis, the fact remains that the NT frequently cites New Covenant soteriological promises but never cites a single New Covenant land promise. See also Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 703–16. For a detailed critique of Gentry and Wellum, see Wade Loring Kuhlewind, “‘I Will Plant Them in This Land’: An Analysis and Critique of Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum’s Kingdom through Covenant with Special Attention to the Progressive Covenantal Land-Promise View” (PhD diss., Bob Jones University, 2018).

<sup>30</sup> No one has ever been saved apart from the transforming grace of the gospel encapsulated in the New Covenant. Because the New Covenant contains the gospel in seed form, God extended the basic soteriological benefits of the New Covenant to believing individuals living under the Old Covenant. That explains the occurrence of occasional New Covenant expressions under the Old Covenant (e.g., Isa 51:7; Pss 32:1–2; 37:31).

<sup>31</sup> This is the whole point of the guarantee that “they shall *all* know me”; that never was nor could be true under only the Mosaic Covenant. Moreover, as my friend David Saxon pointed out, that New Covenant provision is reduced to a mere meaningless truism if “Israel” has become (coextensive with) the Church, since it would then be tantamount to promising that “all believers shall know me.”

<sup>32</sup> The primary examples of this are seen in Table 2 itself and in the Israel-specific promises described below, which are equally part of the New Covenant. Indeed, God’s primary motive in establishing the New Covenant, as stated by Ezekiel, is the sanctification of his name “which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went” (Ezek 36:22)—an accusation that assumes a prior covenantal connection to God’s name in a way that simply does not correspond to

### Israel-Specific Provisions of the New Covenant<sup>33</sup>

The New Covenant is rooted in the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants<sup>34</sup> because it is the mechanism for facilitating and fulfilling all of those preceding covenants.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, the New Covenant is rooted in the national and historical identity of Israel as the recipient of all those covenants: “Just as I have brought all this great calamity [because they violated the Mosaic Covenant] on *this people* [God’s people by virtue of the Abrahamic Covenant], so I will bring *on them* all the good [including the Davidic Covenant] that I have promised *them* [in the New Covenant]” (Jer 32:42; cf. 31:28). Forever.<sup>36</sup> In fact, most of the New Covenant promises are so nationally and historically rooted that they can be meaningfully applied only to those connected to that national-historical identity and experience. In addition, most are in some way linked to the land originally granted via the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>37</sup> Finally, these are not random, isolated prophecies. Because they are all components of the same covenant, they fall or stand together and either fail or find fulfillment via the New Covenant (though not necessarily all at the same time).

#### *Regathering*

One article of the New Covenant (repeated multiple times) promises a universal regathering of Israel “from all the nations” to which God had scattered them (#8). I, for one, am part of no people group whose ancestors were driven out of a divinely granted land and scattered among the nations in judgment. The NT never attempts to relate the New Covenant promises of regathering to Gentiles or the Church at large. Nor were they fulfilled in the Babylonian return, because of the next point.

#### *Restoration*

Tethered to the regathering promises of the New Covenant are promises to replant those regathered in the same land originally covenanted to their fathers, forever (#9). The language could hardly be more explicit:

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Gentiles converted into the Church. Beyond the covenant’s broader context, however, Israel-specific threads are also woven tightly into some of the soteriological promises themselves (e.g., Ezek 36:33).

<sup>33</sup> For an illustration that I often use to explain what I mean by “Israel-specific,” see Appendix 4.

<sup>34</sup> I would include the Levitical Covenant as well (see #14, with references, in the chart), though that requires explanation beyond the scope of this article.

<sup>35</sup> The New Covenant brings to fruition the Abrahamic promise of universal blessing and land in perpetuity. The New Covenant internalizes and enables obedience to the law of God that the Mosaic Covenant imposed from without as an unbearable “yoke” (Acts 15:10) and justifies Jew and Gentile “from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39). And the New Covenant reasserts the perpetuity of the Davidic Covenant with an oath (Jer 33:20-22, 25-26) that is ultimately fulfilled by “Jesus the mediator of the New Covenant” (Heb 12:24), “the Son of David” (Matt 1:1), and “Son of the Highest” who will receive “the throne of his father David” and “reign over the house of Jacob forever” (Luke 1:32-33).

<sup>36</sup> Jer 31:36, 40; 32:39, 40; Ezek 34:22, 28, 29; 37:22, 23, 25, 26, 28. The eternity of the New Covenant is one of its signal features; that is why it is also called “an everlasting covenant.”

<sup>37</sup> See #6-9, 13-16, 18-23 in Table 2; each either states or necessitates, in one passage or another, some connection to the land.



“I will bring them back to *this place*” (Jer 32:37).

“I will assuredly plant them in *this land* with all My heart and with all My soul” (Jer 32:41).

“I will . . . bring you into *your own land*” (Ezek 36:24).

“Then you shall dwell in *the land that I gave to your fathers*” (Ezek 36:28).

“Then they shall dwell in *the land that I have given to Jacob My servant, where your fathers dwelt*; and they shall dwell there, they, their children, and their children's children, forever” (Ezek 37:25).

The final reference above negates the possibility that these New Covenant restoration promises were fulfilled after the Babylonian captivity, since Israel was again booted out of their land by the Romans, for about 1800 years. These are eternal promises attached to an everlasting covenant. That is why it is so important to read these promises in their full New Covenant context.<sup>38</sup>

### *Reunification*

Folded into the New Covenant is a promise to reunite Judah and Israel into one nation, forever (#15). It is not at all clear in what sense this promise could be fulfilled in any meaningful way for anyone outside of those historical, national identities. Wound tightly<sup>39</sup> to that promise (Ezek 37:15–22) is God’s pledge to cleanse and deliver “them” (this unified nation) from all their past sin (37:23), to give them “David” as their king (37:24),<sup>40</sup> to guarantee their ongoing obedience (37:24), to give them and their descendants “the land that I have given to Jacob” forever (37:25),<sup>41</sup> to make an everlasting covenant of peace with them (37:26), and to dwell in their presence forever as an international testimony to God’s sanctifying power and grace (37:27–28). It is a single, unified oracle all cut from the same New Covenant cloth.

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<sup>38</sup> The New Covenant is, itself, nestled into a context addressing the certainty of the return from the Babylonian captivity (e.g., Jer 32:1–25), for the sake of comparison and contrast. The historical restoration was a temporary return of a still spiritually compromised people (as Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi demonstrate)—a pale shadow of the eschatological restoration described and promised under the New Covenant.

<sup>39</sup> It is important to note that this is not an argument that all these intertwined promises must be fulfilled at the same time (more on that below), but that they must all be fulfilled to the same people to whom they are promised.

<sup>40</sup> This Davidic promise may be a Messianic type fulfilled by Christ, though if that were God’s intent it would have been easy to communicate that much more clearly (“My Branch” or “My Servant”). Personally, I am inclined to see this as an intentionally literal reference to the rule of the resurrected David over Israel, under the universal millennial reign of the resurrected Christ.

<sup>41</sup> Several of these components also raise a question: Do not the “eternal” promises require fulfillment in an eternal new earth (e.g., #13, 14, 18, 20, 23)? My own answer is that “eternal” (עוֹלָם) is governed by its context. “Forever” does not always mean as long as God exists; often it means as long as the current order lasts (e.g., Gen 43:9; Exod 21:6; Deut 13:16; Isa 32:14; Jer 35:6). For example, no one supposes that Exodus 21:5–6 requires a slave to belong to his Israelite master in the new earth. The Hebrew term conveys permanence for as long as the requisite circumstances prevail. In the context of the New Covenant, the word may carry its full force, implying a situation that will continue into the new earth; or it may convey a modified sense, implying “until time ends.” Both the Abrahamic Covenant and New Covenant promises are deeply anchored in the land; so “forever” is as long as the land exists. In fact, some translations (HCSB, NET) translate the Hebrew expression as “permanently” in connection with the land promises.

*Reversal*

God also promises in this New Covenant to reverse his posture towards Israel, forever (#11). By paralleling the divine source of Israel's past judgment with the divine source of Israel's future blessing, God identifies exactly who he has in mind (Jer 32:40–42, NASB):

I will make an *everlasting covenant* with them that *I will not turn away from them*, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me. *I will rejoice over them to do them good* and *will faithfully plant them in this land with all My heart and with all My soul*. For thus says the LORD, “*Just as I brought all this great disaster on this people, so I am going to bring on them all the good that I am promising them.*”

In Isaiah, following the same contrast between God's past chastening and future blessings that identifies the promise as Israel-specific (54:7–8), God certifies with an oath that his change of posture toward them will be eternal and unalterable (54:9–10):

“For this is like the waters of Noah to Me; / For as I have sworn / That the waters of Noah would no longer cover the earth, / So have I sworn / That I would not be angry with you, nor rebuke you. / For the mountains shall depart / And the hills be removed, / But My kindness shall not depart from you, / Nor shall My covenant of peace be removed,” / Says the LORD, who has mercy on you.

*Renovation*

The New Covenant also promises the rebuilding, abundance, and perpetual security of not only Jerusalem (#7) but the entire land promised by God to Israel (#18). Again, the language in these passages is unambiguously Israel-specific.

*Recognition*

This promissory category groups together New Covenant provisions with international ramifications (#12, 19–22). The New Covenant will reverse the way Israel has historically been viewed and treated by the world at large. But “Yahweh's salvific activity on Israel's behalf is driven not primarily by pity for his people,”<sup>42</sup> or even by a sense of justice because she deserves better. Jews are historically distinct from all other peoples for the sole reason that God created them and chose them and bound himself to them voluntarily and verbally, out of pure sovereign grace (Deut 7). What is at stake in the fulfilment of all these New Covenant promises to the Jews is not the Jews; what is at stake is the character of God. It is not about the Jews; it is about the trustworthiness of the words God chose to use. God gives at least four reasons—in the New Covenant—for reversing the nations' posture and perception towards Israel. They are all linked not to Israel's merits but to God's character:

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<sup>42</sup> Daniel L. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2:421.

1. Sovereignty—because he has freely chosen to favor the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob out of all the nations (Jer 33:24–26).
2. Mercy—because he has purposed to magnify before all the nations his grace in saving undeserving Israel (Isa 60:21; 61:3).
3. Purity—because he has resolved to purge his own reputation among the nations (Ezek 36:22–23).
4. Integrity—because he has determined to display to all the nations that he is a God who does exactly what he says (Ezek 36:36).

God’s salvation, whether of Jews or Gentiles, is always about the glory of his sovereignty, his mercy, his holiness, and his integrity. God has determined to make the fulfillment of his New Covenant promises to unfaithful, undeserving Israel Exhibit A to all the nations that he is the God whose words can always be trusted: “Then the nations which are left all around you shall know that I, the LORD, have rebuilt the ruined places and planted what was desolate. *I, the LORD, have spoken it, and I will do it*” (Ezek 36:36).

#### What about the Gentiles?

In my view, the NT leaves no doubt that the New Covenant has been inaugurated<sup>43</sup> and its soteriological benefits extended to Gentiles as well as Jews.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, it is important to notice not only that Gentiles were not the original recipients of the New Covenant but also that the New Covenant rarely if ever mentions Gentile *inclusion* as one of its components.<sup>45</sup> The theme of Gentile inclusion in God’s redemptive purposes comes from an independent line of divine promises predating the New Covenant.<sup>46</sup>

Two separate rivers of the divine purpose—God’s determination to bless the Gentiles with salvation and God’s New Covenant promises to Israel—converge to create the Church. That convergence is the “mystery” to which Paul refers in Ephesians 2–3. The New Covenant becomes the instrument by which God extends his saving work to the Gentiles, because “the blood of the everlasting covenant” (Heb 13:20) is the means by which all God’s saving work is accomplished (“for the Jew first, and also for the Gentile”), and because the Mediator of the New Covenant is Christ (Heb 9:15; 12:24), in whom all of God’s redemptive work centers. Nevertheless, the New Covenant

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<sup>43</sup> Inauguration does not mean “fulfillment” but “initialization.” The word allows select features of the New Covenant to be operative without requiring all aspects of the New Covenant to be operative—just as a president’s inauguration marks the beginning, not the completion or fulfillment, of his presidency. (After all, he, too, has made a lot of promises on the campaign trail that he has not fulfilled yet!) The meaning and consistent application of this word *inauguration* is a significant distinction between dispensational and non-dispensational approaches.

<sup>44</sup> The fact that the New Covenant was made with Israel does not mean its benefits cannot be extended to others (Rom 9:15); but it does mean that its components, promises, and provisions must nevertheless be fulfilled, as stated, to those to whom it was made.

<sup>45</sup> This is all the more surprising in light of the fact that the Abrahamic and even Mosaic covenants include references to blessing on the Gentiles. But cf. Isa 55:4; Amos 9:12.

<sup>46</sup> E.g., Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; Deut 32:43; Ps 117:1; Isa 11:10; 60:3; Jer 16:19; Mal 1:11.

itself, as it stands, retains an expressly Judeo-centric orientation that anticipates an expressly Judeo-centric fulfillment, most of which revolves around the land promises.

### Sworn Divine Confirmation of the New Covenant

The New Covenant is not a single promise, or even a small cluster of spiritual promises. It is a covenantal archipelago glittering with dozens of detailed pledges and predictions—all addressed to Israel and Judah, all interconnected, and all confirmed by five sovereign oaths in which God ties their certainty to the most inviolable principles of creation itself.

Thus says the LORD, / Who gives the sun for a light by day, / The ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night, / Who disturbs the sea, / And its waves roar / (The LORD of hosts is his name): / “*If those ordinances depart / From before Me*, says the LORD, / Then *the seed of Israel* shall also cease / From being a nation before Me forever.” (Jer 31:35–36)

Thus says the LORD: / “*If heaven above can be measured, / And the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, / I will also cast off all the seed of Israel / For all that they have done*, says the LORD.” (Jer 31:37)

Thus says the LORD: “*If you can break My covenant with the day and My covenant with the night, so that there will not be day and night in their season*, then My covenant may also be broken *with David My servant*, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and *with the Levites*, the priests, My ministers.” (Jer 33:20–21)

*As the host of heaven cannot be numbered, nor the sand of the sea measured*, so will I multiply *the descendants of David My servant and the Levites* who minister to Me. (Jer 33:22).

Moreover the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, “Have you not considered what these people have spoken, saying,<sup>47</sup> “The two families which the LORD has chosen, he has also cast them off? Thus they have despised My people, as if they should no more be a nation before them. Thus says the LORD: *If My covenant is not with day and night, and if I have not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth*, then I will cast away *the descendants of Jacob and David My servant*, so that I will not take any of his descendants to be rulers over *the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*. For I will cause their captives to return, and will have mercy on them.” (Jer 33:23–26).

Biblical theology is about not only what God says, but how he has chosen to say it. It is difficult to envision how God could have made it any clearer that national Israel would never be cast aside or cease to exist (Jer 31:35–37). Some have generalized this passage as a promise “that the New Covenant would be endless in duration.”<sup>48</sup> But the oath says nothing about the New Covenant at all; it is a

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<sup>47</sup> Jeremiah 33:24 has often struck me as a remarkably accurate description of the hard supersessionism of old-line covenant theologians.

<sup>48</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, PTW (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 473.

promise of the perpetuity of those with whom he made the New Covenant (Israel). Similarly, Ray Ortlund's explanatory note on verses 35–36 reads: “God gives a fixed order to the natural creation, and it is just as impossible for the New Covenant to cease as it is for the natural order to cease.”<sup>49</sup> That is true but astonishingly irrelevant to what God actually says in the text being explained. He does not promise that the New Covenant would never cease to exist, but that “the seed [offspring] of Israel” would never cease to exist “as a nation before me forever.”

God immediately issues the second oath in Jeremiah 31:37, where Ortlund explains: “The full extent of creation is unfathomable and it is equally unfathomable that God would cast off the Israel of this New Covenant.”<sup>50</sup> Again, however, that is not how the text reads. The note tweaks the text with the addition of a single word (“*the* Israel of this New Covenant”). It is a small word, but it blows a hole big enough to drive an entire systematic theology through. The implication is that “the Israel” in view is a different “Israel” than the one being addressed in the historical context.

God might have said (in Jer 31:36), “then *the seed of Abraham* shall cease from being a *people* before me,” but he did not. He could have said (in Jer 31:37), “then I will cast off all *the seed of Abraham*,” but he did not. If God had made the New Covenant with “the seed of Abraham” it might have furnished significant biblical-theological warrant for applying it exclusively to the Church (cf. Gal 3:29). If that had been God's intent all along, he could have made that far clearer. Again, biblical theology is not only about what God says, but how he has chosen to say it.

The timelessness of God's commitment in these divine oaths is not merely to believers but to a nation that he will graciously convert into a nation of believers, to the international fame of his name and as a testimony that he is a God of his word. And yet the history of theology supplies ample evidence that we theologians can be wonderfully creative with the text when there is something we want it to say. What is at stake in how we handle these New Covenant oaths, and the promises that they are intended to guarantee as inviolable, is nothing less than *the integrity of God and the trustworthiness of his words*. These are not random texts that I happen to think are important; they are the divine oaths that anchor the meaning and intentions of the New Covenant. There could be no more sober caution to any theologian, and no more telling test of any theological system, than that.<sup>51</sup>

New Covenant language and its parallels in the NT prevent us from reserving all of its promises exclusively for Israel (as some dispensationalists have attempted to argue). At the same time, the NT's utter silence on the New Covenant's many Israel-specific promises prohibits us from collapsing the entire New Covenant into a purely spiritual manifesto fulfilled now in the Church. Even a future conversion of ethnic Israel, which many covenant theologians now acknowledge, does not alone satisfy the multiplexity and ethnospecificity of the New Covenant.

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<sup>49</sup> Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., Notes on Isaiah, in *The ESV Study Bible*, ed. Lane T. Dennis, et al. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 1432.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> It seems, therefore, a remarkable oversight that G. K. Beale's 1,000-page magisterial work focusing on “the unfolding of the Old Testament in the New” gives so much attention to the New Covenant yet includes no discussion of any of these divine-oath passages.

*The Centrality of the Land in the New Covenant*

Land is one of the threads that runs through God’s entire covenant relationship with Israel. In the Abrahamic Covenant God promised to Abraham and to his descendants, among other things, a specific piece of geography, forever.<sup>52</sup> Under the Mosaic Covenant God gave that land to Abraham’s descendants and warned that if they broke their covenant obligations he would evict them from it (and he did), but he also promised that he would bring them back into that land (and he did, though they were later evicted again). The New Covenant promises that one day God will return them to that land permanently and change them internally so that they will never again forsake him. That has not happened yet. Any interpretation of the New Covenant, then, must decide what to do with its persistent and explicit references to the land. What is to be done, for example, with the explicit geographical and topographical details in Jeremiah 31:38–40?<sup>53</sup> These verses describe the rebuilding of Jerusalem along its northern, western, southern, and eastern boundaries, respectively.

God attaches unmistakably and, more to the point, *unnecessarily* explicit geographical language about what he is going to do to their capital city and their land as part of the New Covenant. Most interpreters understand that this is still part of the New Covenant, but Kidner turns one detail on its head when he argues, “[T]he promise that the city would never again be overthrown (31:40) is a further sign that we must look beyond ‘the present Jerusalem’ to ‘the Jerusalem above’ (Gal 4:25–26).”<sup>54</sup> Why? Because Jerusalem *was* overthrown again in AD 70. But history did not end in AD 70. The promise of Jerusalem’s perpetual security compels us to look beyond post-Babylon Jerusalem; but it does not compel us to look beyond an as-yet future earthly Jerusalem.<sup>55</sup>

This geographical specificity keeps showing up throughout the discussion of the New Covenant that spans Jeremiah 31–33.

Now therefore, thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning *this city* of which you say, “It shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence”: Behold, I will gather them out of all countries where I have driven them in My anger, in My fury, and in great wrath; *I will bring them back to this place*, and I will cause them to dwell safely. . . . And I will make an *everlasting covenant* with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me. Yes, I will rejoice over them to do them good, and I will assuredly plant them *in this land*, with all My heart and with

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<sup>52</sup> Gen 12:7; 13:14–17; 15:7, 18; 17:8; 24:7; 26:3; 28:4, 13; 35:12; 50:24. An often-overlooked detail of the Abrahamic Covenant is that God promised the land not merely to Abraham’s seed, but to Abraham himself (Gen 13:15, 17; 15:7; 17:8; 26:3; 28:4, 13; 35:12).

<sup>53</sup> This passage exemplifies the importance of my earlier point about seeing Jeremiah 31:31–34 as merely the preamble to the New Covenant, followed by the divine oaths in 31:35–37 and the geographical specifics in 31:38–40. The first major reference to the New Covenant is not 31:31–34 but 31:31–40.

<sup>54</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 111.

<sup>55</sup> I love Kidner as a commentator, but what turns Kidner’s interpretation here on *its* head is the prosaic reality of 1948. Whether the recreation of the state of Israel was a fulfillment of prophecy or not, it was undeniably a providential performance of miraculous proportions. To deny that is to shut one’s eyes to the hand of God in the present world (as so many Israelis themselves have done) and to ignore his sovereign rule over the affairs of nations.

all My soul. For thus says the LORD: Just as I have brought all this great calamity on this people, so I will bring on them all the good that I have promised them [New Covenant]. And fields will be bought *in this land* of which you say, “It is desolate, without man or beast; it has been given into the hand of the Chaldeans.” Men will buy fields for money, sign deeds and seal them, and take witnesses, *in the land of Benjamin, in the places around Jerusalem, in the cities of Judah, in the cities of the mountains, in the cities of the lowland, and in the cities of the South*; for I will cause their captives to return, says the LORD. (Jer 32:36–44)

God could hardly make it clearer that he has the earthly Jerusalem in view. If God knowingly means something entirely different from what he knows will be understood by the terms he uses, it is difficult to escape the impression that he is misleading people—seriously and unnecessarily—because he did not need to be this specific if the natural meaning of his words was not his intention.

It is impossible to read through the Bible attentively and conclude that land is an inconsequential detail.<sup>56</sup> It is a tenacious and explicit theme in the OT. So it should hardly be surprising that the New Covenant reiterates this land component *repeatedly* (Jer 32:40–41; Ezek 34:13, 25–27; 36:24, 28, 34–35; 37:12, 14, 21–22, 25), *explicitly* (“the land that I gave to your fathers,” Ezek 36:28; “the land that I have given to Jacob,” Ezek 37:25), and *insistently* (“I will plant them in this land with all my heart and with all my soul,” Jer 32:41).<sup>57</sup> This is what even the Mosaic Covenant anticipated—not just a temporary return to the land after captivity, but a return to the land accompanied by internal transformation that would enable them to love and obey God, and possess the land forever (Deut 30:5–10). That is why at the heart of the debate over the fulfillment of the New Covenant is the issue of the land.

### *New Covenant Expectations*

The New Covenant is a multiplex prophetic and promissory covenant made with ethnic Israel, a constellation of promises that revolve around two major events: the national conversion and the national restoration of national Israel. Theological views on those prophetic expectations have varied considerably over the centuries,<sup>58</sup> but they have tended to gravitate toward one of two major hermeneutical poles.

### Supersessionism

Traditional covenantalists hold that because Israel rejected Messiah, God abandoned the nation and bears no further relationship or obligation to Israel (*qua* Israel); consequently, all her promises are transferred to and fulfilled in the Church. This view is broadly known as replacement theology or supersessionism, though like many systematic theological positions, it has developed a number of permutations over the years.

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<sup>56</sup> See Appendix 5 for sixty OT references to God’s giving of the land to Abraham and his descendants.

<sup>57</sup> God rarely talks like this; such impassioned language expresses how serious he is about this promise.

<sup>58</sup> Michael J. Vlach, “Israel in Church History,” in *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel*, 209. For a more detailed treatment see idem, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 27–76.

I neither view nor use either of these as pejorative terms, merely descriptive ones, though I am well aware that most covenantalists reject the descriptor. More recently, covenant theologians prefer to describe the Church as the “fruition” of Israel,<sup>59</sup> “spiritual Israel,”<sup>60</sup> the “new Israel” or “true Israel,”<sup>61</sup> or even “restored Israel.”<sup>62</sup> Don Hagner writes, “The church does not take the place of Israel; rather Israel finds its true identity in the church”; the view nevertheless insists that the church is “the heir to the promises” originally made to Israel.<sup>63</sup> The problem, then, is that (1) no single substitute term has emerged, and (2) most dispensationalists argue that the more modified expressions still amount to some form of supersessionism or replacement. In view of more recent covenantal expressions, one is tempted to propose the term *transmogrification theology*.

In any case, the traditional view, though not extinct, has been largely replaced with a more moderate approach that affirms a future conversion of ethnic Israel in keeping with Romans 11:26–27 but still denies any future national role or restoration of Israel to the land.<sup>64</sup> (Incidentally, Paul ties this national conversion to a New Covenant passage, Isa 59:20–21.) G. K. Beale’s modified supersessionism, however, denies any such future conversion for ethnic Israel; he thinks that the land-related promises “are fulfilled in a physical form” in the new earth “but that the inauguration of this fulfillment is mainly spiritual” in the present Church.<sup>65</sup>

Many of these modifications reflect, to varying degrees, a welcome shift in what I view as the right direction, though in my estimation they still fall short of what both the text and the trustworthiness of God require.<sup>66</sup> Following are some reasons why.

#### *Interpretational Inconsistency: Why Are Some New Covenant Promises Literal but Not Others?*

The fact that the New Covenant’s soteriological promises are fulfilled literally for Jews raises a question of hermeneutical consistency. If one is willing to affirm (as many covenant theologians are) that all of the New Covenant’s soteriological elements will be literally fulfilled to literal Israel in a future nationwide conversion (on this present earth), what would prevent one from affirming

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<sup>59</sup> Michal Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 131. More recently, however, Horton has argued somewhat differently: “The church does not supersede Israel” because “the church has always existed since Adam and Eve.” See “Covenant Theology,” in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*, ed. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022), 71.

<sup>60</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 964.

<sup>61</sup> Schreiner, 36, 860.

<sup>62</sup> Thielman, 707.

<sup>63</sup> “Matthew,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, and Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003), 264. Cf. Oren R. Martin, “Question 6,” in *40 Questions About Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2020), 68.

<sup>64</sup> Erickson, 964; Schreiner, 859-60; Thielman, 370; Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 132; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1994), 1104.

<sup>65</sup> *New Testament Biblical Theology*, 751. In what must rank as the most ironic statement of his 1,072-page biblical theology of the NT, Beale explains that space constraints prevent any detailed discussion of Rom 11:26 (710).

<sup>66</sup> “Readings that mute God’s Word or reduce its content need to be challenged” and “forms of covenantal supersession do exactly that, with negative consequences for the character of God” and “our ability to understand his word.” Darrell L. Bock, “A Progressive Dispensational Response,” in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies*, 221.



(consistently, it seems) that all of the New Covenant's non-soteriological promises will also be just as literally fulfilled to literal Israel in the future (on this present earth)?<sup>67</sup> On a covenantalist view, a minority of the New Covenant's promises will be literally fulfilled for literal Israel on the present earth, yet the majority of its promises will not be. Instead, the latter are fulfilled figuratively in the Church now<sup>68</sup> or literally only in the new earth.<sup>69</sup> The exegetical basis for such an inconsistent hermeneutic is far from clear. Moreover, this interpretational inconsistency seems to rest on a logical fallacy.

*Logical Fallacy: Why Must the New Covenant Be Fulfilled All at Once?*

Covenantalist interpreters rightly recognize that the NT extends the soteriological promises of the New Covenant in the present NT age beyond ethnic Israel. That leads many of them, however, to assume that the *entire* New Covenant must necessarily now be fulfilled and in force. This conflates *inauguration* (the New Covenant has now been initiated) with *fulfillment* (the New Covenant has now been fulfilled).<sup>70</sup>

“Inaugurated” implies what Beale calls “beginning fulfillment.”<sup>71</sup> But it does not require (as Beale argues) that every provision of the New Covenant must, in some sense, be currently realized. Beale is correct that all the promises of the New Covenant are “intertwined with one another and, from the Old Testament vantage point, were to occur simultaneously.”<sup>72</sup> But this invites two counterpoints.

First, the crucial qualifier is the phrase “from the Old Testament vantage point.” When Jesus read Isaiah 61:1–2 in his hometown synagogue, he stopped abruptly in mid-sentence after the first line of 61:2, excluding “the day of vengeance of our God.” Then he closed the scroll and announced, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:17–21, NASB). All the elements in Isaiah 61:1–3 are (to borrow Beale's language) “intertwined with one another and, from the Old Testament vantage point, were to occur simultaneously.” And yet, they did not.<sup>73</sup> Jesus' exclusion of the judgment

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<sup>67</sup> I posed this question to Frank Thielman via email (November 18, 2011), and his reply (December 8, 2011) was both gracious and, well, frank: “I really need to give your question more attention, and it gives me a lot of food for thought. I think my biggest concern in imagining a literal fulfillment of several of the elements you mention . . . on your list is that these elements seem to be given a less-than-literal fulfillment in the New Testament itself. The ingathering of scattered Israel, for example, seems to find its fulfillment in the multi-ethnic Church, if my reading of the shepherding imagery in John is correct. Jerusalem now seems to be the Jerusalem above (Gal 4:21–31; Rev 21:9–27).” Both of these points seem to me to give inadequate weight to the multiple and repeated references to precise geographical and topographical details woven into the New Covenant (e.g., Jer 31:38–40; 32:36–44). Thielman continues: “I do not think that Rom 11:26 can be read in any other way than as a reference to a vast influx of ethnic Jews into the people of God in the last days. These other elements, however, seem to me to be fulfilled in less literal ways and that makes me think that other elements of the language of Israel's eschatological restoration in the Old Testament should also be read in less than literal ways.”

<sup>68</sup> The “promises made to Israel are fulfilled in the Church as the new people of God, the new Israel (1 Pet 2:9–10)” (Schreiner, 36).

<sup>69</sup> Beale, 751.

<sup>70</sup> On this reasoning, God's blessing of Ishmael and Esau with some of the same benefits promised to Abraham (numberless descendants and a land inheritance) would have signaled the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant; but clearly it did not.

<sup>71</sup> *New Testament Biblical Theology*, 729.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 771.

<sup>73</sup> Jesus elsewhere clearly taught that he had not come this time to judge (John 12:47).

component of what was from all appearances a seamless and “intertwined” prophecy signifies that prophecies may, in fact, be inaugurated without being fulfilled in their entirety. It would be a serious mistake, both hermeneutically and theologically, to insist (on the basis of Luke 4:21) that the rest of the Isaiah 61 oracle had to be fulfilled during Jesus’ first coming and then set about looking for ways in which it “must” have been fulfilled spiritually or symbolically or typologically. It is just as mistaken to insist that the non-soteriological, Israel-specific promises of the New Covenant “must” be fulfilled now in the Church, when the NT is as silent about them as Jesus was about Isaiah 61:3b.

Second, Beale’s argument operates on the basis of a major oversight—the national scope of the New Covenant.<sup>74</sup> The covenant has been inaugurated through Christ and its soteriological benefits extended to both Jew and Gentile on an individual basis. But what will signal its imminent and ultimate fulfillment is Israel’s covenantal transformation *as a nation* (Rom 11:26; cf. Zech 12:10–14). When that happens, *then* the spiritual and physical promises will be “intertwined with one another and . . . occur simultaneously.”

The idea that a prophecy “may have an anticipatory fulfillment . . . without exhausting the full prediction” is not a new or narrowly held view.<sup>75</sup> It is simply not applied by supersessionists to the New Covenant, which is treated as an all-or-nothing proposition because its fulfillment is linked to Christ. But this, too, suggests an oversimplification.

*Eschatological Conflation: The New Covenant, like All Revelation, Finds Its Climax and Fulfillment in Christ, but at Which Coming?*

As in any other field, simplification is a virtue in theology, but oversimplification can lead to ambiguity and imprecision. Likewise, Christocentricity may be the essence of biblical theology but that, too, can be oversimplified. It sounds theologically irrefutable to assert, “Every significant whole-Bible theme climaxes in the person and work of Jesus the Messiah,” or, “If you interpret the Bible in a way that does not point to Jesus, then you are not interpreting the Bible in the way that Jesus himself said you should.”<sup>76</sup> These assertions, however, beg the question. No Christian theologian doubts the hermeneutical centrality of Christ, but Christian theology is equally clear that the advent of Christ—as presented in both the Old and New Testaments—is not a one-time event, but a complex of two distinct comings, separated (as we now know in retrospect) by two millennia so far. Consequently, “the work of Jesus the Messiah” is not executed in its entirety at the first coming (cf., e.g., Isa 61 and Luke 4 explained above). To be sure, Christ’s redemptive work is complete, which forms the basis for the institution of the New Covenant of which he is the Mediator (Heb 12:24). But one of the key points at issue between premillennial and non-premillennial conceptions of the eschaton—as well as

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<sup>74</sup> A supersessionist, of course, would not consider this an oversight but, rather, just a very different reading of the covenant’s audience and intent.

<sup>75</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2011), 328.

<sup>76</sup> Andrew David Naselli, “Question 5” and “Question 8,” in *40 Questions About Biblical Theology*, 59, 85. For insightful critiques of this book, see the reviews by Ken Casillas in *JBTW* 1, vol. 2 (Spring 2021), 85–87, and Paul Henebury’s at <https://sharperiron.org/article/review-40-questions-about-biblical-theology>.

dispensational and non-dispensational conceptions of the millennium—is which eschatological prophetic fulfillments are not to be realized until Christ’s second coming. To say that the age of eschatological fulfillment comes in Christ is not at all the same as saying that “the age of eschatological fulfillment has come in Christ.”<sup>77</sup>

*False Comparison: How Can a Promise Be a Symbol?*

If a symbol is *intended* by an author, then a literal interpretation actually demands that we take the symbol symbolically, not literalistically. When a teenager says, “I’m bringing my own wheels to the game tonight,” a literal interpretation demands that we understand him to mean that he will be driving his car to the game, not that he will show up lugging two tires on each arm. Literal interpretation understands that metaphor is a normal part of literal communication.

Supersessionists believe that the NT teaches that most of the New Covenant promises are actually intended to be understood symbolically or typologically. So when they interpret New Covenant promises symbolically, they claim a literal hermeneutic—because the NT, by using various OT elements symbolically, teaches us that the OT is intentionally symbolic. For instance, the Book of Hebrews explains that the Old Covenant sacrificial system was full of signs and shadows of spiritual realities (Heb 8:5). Galatians 4 uses Hagar and Sarah as an “allegory” of two different covenants.<sup>78</sup> The NT is signaling us, therefore, that the OT was an intentionally typological book presenting spiritual realities under the guise of symbols.

But this argument depends on comparing two very different categories—not just apples and oranges; more like apples and orangutans. There is a fundamental, qualitative difference between, on the one hand, a literal event (like the exodus), or institution (like the sacrificial system), or person (like Hagar and Sarah), or place (like Jerusalem) being used as a type of some spiritual reality, and, on the other hand, arguing that a *promise* is a type or symbol of some spiritual reality. A promise is a speech-act, a character commitment. “A promise entails an obligation. When somebody makes a promise, they’re not just stating something, they are doing something. They are forming a relationship and creating an expectation that carries moral obligation.”<sup>79</sup>

The expectation created by a covenant—whether Genesis 12 or 2 Samuel 7 or Jeremiah 31—is grounded in what the recipient, based on his cultural, historical, and revelational context, could reasonably be expected to understand from the terms promised. “To postulate a ‘fulfillment’ of these covenant promises” based on an interpretation of the terms that was inaccessible to the recipient “overlooks the performative nature of the word of promise, violates the legitimate expectations of the recipients, and brings the integrity of God into question.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Naselli, “Question 9,” in *40 Questions About Biblical Theology*, 96 (emphasis added). Yet, change the word “fulfillment” to “inauguration,” and my objection to Naselli’s statement evaporates. In eschatology, as in good humor, timing is everything.

<sup>78</sup> Not all agree, however, on which covenant Sarah signifies, the New or the Abrahamic; a degree of ambiguity and subjectivity is an occupational hazard when it comes to interpreting symbols.

<sup>79</sup> Craig L Blaising, “Israel and Hermeneutics,” in *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel*, 160.

<sup>80</sup> Blaising, 161.

The scriptural principles of progressive revelation and self-interpretation neither mean nor require “that the later Scriptures in the New Testament *reinterpret* the Old Testament sayings.”<sup>81</sup> The view that the NT provides a new hermeneutical lens that significantly alters the meaning and referents of OT prophecy rests, moreover, on a rhetorical fallacy.

*Rhetorical Fallacy: Why Does It Have to Be Either-Or?*

The universalization of God’s redemptive purposes does not necessarily universalize all particular prophetic promises targeted at a specific audience. Again, Craig Blasing puts it succinctly.

Isaiah foresaw the extension of the favored term “my people” to Gentile nations *in addition to not in substitution of or redefinition of* Israel (Isa 19:24–25). . . . God’s plans for Israel and the nations are not mutually exclusive or successive programs but complementary throughout the entire canonical narrative. It is not necessary to eliminate the particular in order to institute the universal nor is it necessary to expand the particular to become the universal.<sup>82</sup>

Supersessionists argue that the land promise to Abraham was universalized to include the whole world (Rom 4:13). But if the promise of a specific geographical inheritance (Gen 15:7, 18; 17:8; 28:4, 13; etc.) is swallowed up in a world-inheritance, so that the land-related promises of the New Covenant are globalized, then how do we make any sense out of the original terms of the promise? If “the land” becomes “the world,” and the New Covenant promises to bring Israel back into the land God gave to their fathers, then how will God “bring them back into” . . . the world? Granted, the overall promise has expanded from “I will give you this land” to “the meek shall inherit the earth.” The latter *expands* the former, but it does not and cannot *negate* the former.<sup>83</sup>

Before we argue, therefore, that the NT posits a new hermeneutical grid for how we interpret the New Covenant’s non-soteriological promises, we need to answer this question: Does the NT require an *either-or* decision that “entails a radically revised understanding of God’s faithfulness to his promises”?<sup>84</sup> Or does the NT allow a *both-and* hermeneutical approach that *both* (a) recognizes an inauguration of the New Covenant that graciously extends its soteriological benefits beyond the original recipients, *and* (b) expects an equally literal fulfillment of all its promises to those to whom

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<sup>81</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Recovering the Unity of the Bible: One Continuous Story, Plan, and Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2009), 134 (emphasis original).

<sup>82</sup> “Israel and Hermeneutics,” 162 (emphasis original).

<sup>83</sup> This point is significant since most covenantalist explanations of the land promise make it sound for all the world as if Israel inherits everything but not the land.

<sup>84</sup> P. E. Satterthwaite, “Biblical History” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 49. Satterthwaite is not wildly overstating what supersessionism requires; he is, as a supersessionist, simply explaining what the NT fulfillment of OT prophecies requires of us—“a radically revised” conception of what it means for God to be faithful to his words. I find deeply disturbing any hermeneutic that necessitates radically redefining something as profoundly basic as divine integrity—that God could say something that he has given us every reason to believe means “this” when he actually means “that.”

God originally swore them?<sup>85</sup> The concept of present inauguration (what some call partial or progressive fulfillment) with later completion (final fulfillment) is a widely recognized prophetic phenomenon. Why not recognize the possibility that this is what is going on here, if it allows us to preserve the integrity of God by handling all his words consistently?

*Exegetical Challenge: How Can Some New Covenant Promises Possibly Be Fulfilled in the New Earth?*

In a welcome step toward a more consistently literal hermeneutic, many covenant theologians have proposed that the land-related promises of the New Covenant are fulfilled literally in the new earth.<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless, other loosely land-related promises involve conditions that would be nonsensical in the glorified and sinless new earth. For example, the New Covenant incorporates threats to any nations that will not honor Israel (Isa 60:12), but that cannot be a potential in the new creation. Built into the New Covenant is also the implication of procreation and ongoing generations in the land (Jer 32:39), which is also contrary to other revelation about resurrection life on the new earth. A comprehensive view of all the components of the New Covenant seems to warrant literal fulfillment to national Israel in a coming kingdom prior to the new creation.<sup>87</sup>

### Restorationism

I am using *restorationism* here as an umbrella term for all the Israel-specific components of the New Covenant (i.e., the majority of the New Covenant provisions) that assume and require the return and presence of national Israel in the geographical territory God originally promised to Abraham and to his descendants—promises which the New Covenant explicitly and repeatedly reaffirms. If the New Covenant still anticipates the restoration of Israel to their land, why does the NT not confirm this? I believe it does, though its emphasis is muted for several interrelated reasons. First, the spiritual conversion and transformation of the nation that is at the heart of the New Covenant takes priority; the subsequent promissory blessings of the New Covenant hinge on this. Second, in inaugurating the New Covenant, “God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name” (Acts 15:14); Paul explains how the Jews’ national rejection of the Mediator of the New Covenant plays into this (Rom 10–11). Third, because of their unbelief, “hardening in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (Rom 11:25). How long that will take is anyone’s guess but God’s. But Paul argues that if Israel’s “fall” (their rejection of the New Covenant Mediator) results in the riches of the Gentiles, *how much more* will Israel’s “fullness” (their reception of him) result in massive

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<sup>85</sup> Personally, I would say the NT positively *encourages* a both-and hermeneutic, by quoting very selectively only from the soteriological provisions of the New Covenant, leaving the rest of it intact, and studiously avoiding labeling the Church with New Covenant recipient language.

<sup>86</sup> Poythress, 132–33.

<sup>87</sup> The only exception to this statement might seem to be #24. Some take the description of Isaiah 60:19–20 as purely metaphorical. Cf. Geoffrey W. Grogan “Isaiah,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 6:331. Smith points out that “60:19 does not say that God will destroy or remove the sun and the moon, just that they will be redundant and rather unnecessary” in light of the glory of God’s presence. Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 626.

Gentile salvation (Rom 11:12)? After the “fulness of the Gentiles” prompts the salvation of “all Israel,” the salvific impact on the Gentile population of the millennial world will be astronomical, like “life from the dead” (Rom 11:15). In spite of this muting, however, running just beneath the surface throughout the NT is a subtle but inexorable current of expectation that the Israel-specific dimension of the New Covenant awaits implementation.

### *Luke 1*

Inseparably attached to the angelic announcement that Christ was coming is the angelic explanation of why he was coming: “He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:33; cf. Jer 33:26). There is no exegetical basis, here or anywhere else, for interpreting “the house of Jacob” as anything other than national, ethnic Israel.<sup>88</sup> The only texts that identify “the house of Jacob” as the Church are systematic-theology texts, not biblical texts. For the Messiah to fulfill this angelic proclamation assumes Israel’s presence in the land that God promised (in the New Covenant) to give to them forever.

### *Luke 22; Matthew 19*

The night before his sacrificial death that would initiate the New Covenant, Jesus granted to his disciples a kingdom (Luke 22:29–30). In Matthew’s parallel, Jesus specifies that this will be “in the *regeneration* when the Son of Man sits on the throne of his glory” (19:28).<sup>89</sup> In what Jesus calls “the regeneration,” not only will he be sitting on his throne, but his disciples “will also sit on twelve thrones, *judging the twelve tribes of Israel*” (19:28). Since there will be nothing to adjudicate in a sinless new earth,<sup>90</sup> a reference to the earthly millennial kingdom (“the Messianic Age,” HCSB) fits the details here and parallels the implications of Acts 3:21 (see below). The disciples took this promise quite literally (Matt 20:20–21)—an understanding that Jesus plainly confirmed (20:23).

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<sup>88</sup> Some interpreters have a remarkable ability to look straight through the unambiguous language of a text and see the exact opposite. Christ’s reign, says one, will be “not over an earthly people, but over the spiritual Israel.” Norval Goldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 76.

<sup>89</sup> The Greek word (παλιγγενεσία) occurs only here and in Titus 3:5 in the entire Greek Bible. Philo used it to describe the renewal of the earth following the Flood (*The Life of Moses*, II:65), and Josephus to refer to the “rebuilding and restoration” of Judah after the return from the Babylonian captivity (*Antiquities of the Jews*, XI:3:9). It is translated variously here: “the regenerated world” (CJB); “the Messianic Age” (HCSB); “when all things are renewed” (NET). ESV’s “the new world” seems to imply the new earth (2 Pet 3; Rev 21), which fails to fit the rest of the details in Matthew 21 (e.g., see next footnote).

<sup>90</sup> Some have suggested that “judging” simply has reference here to leadership, citing the verb’s use in the LXX (Judg 3:10; 10:1–2; 12:7). However, (1) this OT use always involves specifically military leadership in battle against Israel’s enemies; (2) nothing in these OT verses precludes the additional sense of adjudication; (3) we know that Israel’s judges were often involved in adjudication (e.g., Judg 4:4–5); and (4) this verb never demonstrably conveys the idea of governing in the NT. It is significant that the *only* passages where it is suggested that κρίνω “could have the broader sense of *rule*” (BDAG) are Matthew 19:28 and Luke 22:30—the very passages under interpretational dispute. If that were the intended sense in these passages, however, the natural word would have been ἄρχω or (in view of the mention of thrones) βασιλεύω.

*Acts 1, 3*

Only a month or so later, after his resurrection, the disciples asked Jesus, “Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). Jesus’ reaction to the disciples’ question differs radically from the reaction of many interpreters: “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (Acts 1:7, ESV). Their question is “a natural one for Jews who have embraced the messianic hope,” and Christ’s response “does not reject the premise of the question that the kingdom will one day be restored to Israel.”<sup>91</sup> Jesus displays no disapproval or disappointment with the disciples (unlike many interpreters) and leaves their expectation of a divinely instituted, potentially imminent, national and geo-political kingdom completely intact.

But there is another overlooked verse that is crucial to bring into this conversation. A few days later, Peter, preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem, uses a noun form (“restoration”) of the same verb used in 1:6 (“restore”): “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive *until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time*” (Act 3:19–21, NASB).

The word *restoration* is significant—not the remaking, or the transforming, but the *restoring* of all things predicted by the prophets awaits the return of Christ. What prophets? Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel—in all those New Covenant passages. If you want to know what that “restoration” looks like, read their New Covenant prophecies. Far from claiming it had arrived in Christ, Peter declared that the restoration described by the prophets was still future. His language in this passage—especially in light of the exchange in 1:6–8—indicates that the Israel-oriented kingdom restoration that they anticipated in 1:6 (and continued to preach and anticipate throughout their lives) awaits the return and personal presence of Christ.

*Romans 11*

Paul’s prayer to God for Israel was that they would be saved (Rom 10:1). The answer to that prayer is predicted in 11:26: “All Israel shall be saved.” To back up that statement, Paul cites Isaiah 59:20–21 (a New Covenant passage), capping off an extended discussion that maintains a persistent distinction between Israel and Gentiles throughout. Indeed, his whole argument rests on that distinction (Rom 9–11). Equally importantly, Paul follows the promise of Israel’s nationwide salvation in 11:26 with an axiomatic assurance: “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (11:29, ESV). One of those “gifts” affirmed throughout the OT, and in the New Covenant particularly, is their restoration to the land which he had sworn to their fathers—even though Paul is here stressing the soteriological dimension for the reasons I stated at the beginning of this section.

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<sup>91</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 61–62.

### *Conclusion*

Restorationism is not a bizarre, recent, or merely populist or political view; and it is certainly not a uniquely dispensational view.<sup>92</sup> Numerous theologians of note believed in the literal restoration of national Israel to the land: John Owen,<sup>93</sup> Wilhelmus à Brakel,<sup>94</sup> John Gill,<sup>95</sup> Jonathan Edwards,<sup>96</sup> David Brown,<sup>97</sup> and C. H. Spurgeon,<sup>98</sup> to give a miniscule sampling. One who is often overlooked is John Edwards (1637–1716)—an Anglican Calvinist, a postmillennial covenant theologian, and a convinced restorationist. In 1699 he published *A Compleat History or Survey of All the Dispensations and Methods of Religion*.<sup>99</sup> He was convinced by Scripture<sup>100</sup> of the future and full conversion of Israel as well as their restoration to the land of Judah—at a time when nothing could have seemed historically less likely.<sup>101</sup> Since at least “the second generation of the Protestant Reformers,” theologians both within and outside of dispensationalism have believed in Jewish restoration to the land God gave to their fathers, just as the New Covenant promises (Deut 30:5, 9; Jer 32:39–41; Ezek 36:24–28; 37:21–25).

The New Covenant is a multiplex prophetic promise made explicitly with the nation of Israel in multiple passages and is most satisfactorily interpreted and fulfilled via a dispensational hermeneutic. This hermeneutical alternative to the various versions of the supersessionist view sees the New Covenant as (a) providing the means by which God graciously extends to the Gentiles the

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<sup>92</sup> Gerald R. McDermott surveys restorationism throughout church history. *The New Christian Zionism* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 45–75. McDermott insists that Christian belief in Jewish restorationism is distinct from dispensationalism, significantly predates dispensationalism, and “goes back two thousand years to the New Testament” (15). While he is (I believe) correct in tracing restorationist expectation back to the NT, his examples from early church history are debatable; they corroborate belief in a widescale eschatological conversion of ethnic Israel, but not so much belief in Jewish restorationism. Indeed, “the general scholarly consensus” seems to be that there is little if any evidence of restorationism among the early church fathers. Donald M. Lewis, *A Short History of Christian Zionism* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2021), 29–30. That changes drastically by the early Puritan era.

<sup>93</sup> Crawford Gribben, *An Introduction to John Owen: A Christian Vision for Every Stage of Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 122–29. In fact, “by the early 1600s, the English Puritans had emerged as the main champions of restorationist readings of prophecy in the English-speaking world.” Lewis, 75.

<sup>94</sup> McDermott, 61–62.

<sup>95</sup> Gill “reflected the strong restorationist consensus of his Puritan forbears” and represents “a stable continuity of interest” in restorationism. Lewis, 75.

<sup>96</sup> McDermott, 62–65.

<sup>97</sup> Lewis, 29. Brown was a postmillennialist best known as a contributor to the classic Bible commentary by Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown. He also wrote an extensive volume on *The Restoration of the Jews* (recently reprinted and available at Amazon.com).

<sup>98</sup> Lewis, 98. Cf. “The Restoration and Conversion of the Jews,” in *Spurgeon’s Sermons*, ed. Anthony Uyl (Woodstock, Ontario: Devoted, 2017), 10:272.

<sup>99</sup> When I first located this three-century-old, 775-page work, it was available from Yale University Library in microform. Now it can be accessed on Google Books. See esp. pp. 691–721.

<sup>100</sup> He discusses Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 30, Isaiah 11 and 60, Hosea 3, Amos 9, Zechariah 12, Luke 2 and 21, 2 Corinthians 3, and especially Romans 11.

<sup>101</sup> Also, though a postmillennialist, he corroborates the virtual universal adherence to premillennialism during the first three centuries of the Church (651–53).



soteriological blessings promised from the beginning,<sup>102</sup> (b) promising a future nationwide conversion of ethnic Israel, and (c) guaranteeing a future restoration of national Israel to the land God originally promised to Abraham and to his seed. All the preceding divine covenants—Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic—have been historically hampered by an unconverted Israel. The New Covenant addresses that perennial problem by guaranteeing the salvation and security of those to whom God graciously and sovereignly extends that covenant. That is why the New Covenant is the ultimate covenantal mechanism by which all the other covenants are ultimately and infallibly and finally fulfilled.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Gen 3:15; 12:3; 26:4; 28:14. Cf. Matt 26:27–28; Acts 3:25–26; 1 Cor 11:25–26; Gal 3:8. The Gentile contexts in which New Covenant language is applied to non-Jews include the last two passages. The Church’s observance of the Lord’s Table, for example, seems nonsensical if Gentiles are not extended beneficiaries of the soteriological benefits of the New Covenant that is pronounced to be at the core of that observance as spelled out in passages like 1 Corinthians 11:25–26.

<sup>103</sup> For a minimally detailed explanation, see footnote 30.

*Appendix 1*  
*Comparative Chart of OT New Covenant Passages*<sup>104</sup>

	Master	Gunn <sup>105</sup>	Kaiser	Compton	Pettegrew	Fredrickson	Talbert
Deuteronomy	(30)				30		(30)
Jeremiah				(24)	24	(24)	(24)
	31	31	31	31	31	31	31
		32	32	32	32	32	32
							33
		50		50		(50)	50
Isaiah			24				
					32	32	(32)
			42	42	42	(42)	(42)
					44	(44)	(44)
			49	49	49	(49)	(49)
				54	54		54
		55	55	55	55		55
		59	59	59	59	59	59
			61	61			61
Ezekiel		11	11	(11)	11	(11)	11
		16	16	16	16	16	16
			18				
			34	34	34	(34)	34
	(36)	36	36	(36)	36	36	36
		37	37	37	37	37	37
					39	39	(39)
Hosea		(2)	2	2	2		
Joel		2			2	2	(2)
Zechariah						(8)	
						12	(12)
Zephaniah							(3)

The most notable difference between my list of OT New Covenant passages and the majority of the others is my inclusion of Jeremiah 33. Numerous links connect Jeremiah 33 to acknowledged New Covenant passages in Jeremiah 31 and 32.

1. Jeremiah 33:8 reiterates even more forcefully the promise of complete forgiveness of sins, a key feature of the New Covenant (31:34).<sup>106</sup>
2. Jeremiah 33:14 reintroduces “the days come” motif that initially introduced the New Covenant (31:31, 38).
3. In 33:14 God promises to perform “that good thing [lit., word, promise]” which he had promised, returning to the very language used of New Covenant promises in 32:39–42.

<sup>104</sup> Based on Fredrickson.

<sup>105</sup> David Gunn, “Overview of New Covenant Passages, Ostensible and Actual,” in *An Introduction to the New Covenant*, ed. Christopher Cone (Hurst, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2013).

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Michael Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton, OR: Lampion, 2017), 188–89.

4. In 33:14 God moreover specifies that the “promise” he will perform is that which he promised “to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah”—the precise language introducing the New Covenant in 31:31.
5. In Jeremiah 33:15, 16 the phrase “in those days” connects the promises that follow (33:15–26) to the New Covenant language that introduces the passage (“behold the days come,” 33:14).
6. The same kind of divine oaths that certify the New Covenant in 31:35–37 also certify the promises in 33 (33:19–22, 25–26).

Given the multiple echoes of Jeremiah 31–32 in Jeremiah 33, the burden of proof surely rests on those who wish to exclude the latter from OT passages describing the New Covenant.

*Appendix 2*  
*Comparison of Deuteronomy 30 and Ezekiel 36*

Deuteronomy 30	Ezekiel 36
<p><sup>4</sup>If any of you are driven out to the farthest parts under heaven, from there the Lord your God will <i>gather</i> [קבץ] you, and from there He will <i>bring</i> [לקח] you. <sup>5</sup>Then the Lord your God will <i>bring</i> [בוא] you to the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it. He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers.</p>	<p><sup>24</sup>For I will <i>take</i> [לקח] you from among the nations, <i>gather</i> [קבץ] you out of all countries, and <i>bring</i> [בוא] you into your own land. (Cf. 37:21: Surely I will <i>take</i> [לקח] the children of Israel from among the nations, wherever they have gone, and will <i>gather</i> [קבץ] them from every side and <i>bring</i> [בוא] them into their own land.)</p>
<p><sup>6</sup>And the Lord your God will <i>circumcise your heart</i> and the <i>heart</i> of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your <i>heart</i> and with all your soul, that you may live.</p>	<p><sup>25</sup>Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.</p>
<p><sup>8</sup>And you will again <i>obey the voice of the Lord</i> and <i>do all His commandments</i> which I command you today.</p>	<p><sup>26</sup>I will <i>give you a new heart</i> and put a new spirit within you; I will take the <i>heart</i> of stone out of your flesh and give you a <i>heart</i> of flesh.</p>
<p><sup>5a</sup>Then the Lord your God will bring you to <i>the land which your fathers possessed</i>, and you shall possess it.</p>	<p><sup>27</sup>I will put My Spirit within you and <i>cause you to walk in My statutes</i>, and you will <i>keep My judgments and do them</i>.</p>
<p><sup>5b</sup>He will prosper you and <i>multiply</i> you more than your fathers.</p>	<p><sup>28</sup>Then you shall dwell in <i>the land that I gave to your fathers</i>; you shall be My people, and I will be your God.</p>
<p><sup>9</sup>The Lord your God will make you abound in all the work of your hand, in <i>the fruit of your body</i>, in <i>the increase [fruit] of your livestock</i>, and in <i>the produce [fruit] of your land</i> for good. For the Lord will again rejoice over you for good as He rejoiced over your fathers.</p>	<p><sup>29</sup>I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. I will call for the grain and <i>multiply</i> it, and bring no famine upon you.</p>
	<p><sup>30</sup>And I will multiply <i>the fruit of your trees and the increase of your fields</i>, so that you need never again bear the reproach of famine among the nations.</p>

*Appendix 3**Jeremiah 31:31–34 as Preamble: A Conceptual Parallel*

The following text is cited from an article authored by two Constitutional scholars and Distinguished Professors of Law, Erwin Chemerinsky and Michael Stokes Paulsen.<sup>107</sup> Italics represent the authors' original emphasis; boldface type reflects my emphasis for comparative purposes.

The Preamble of the U.S. Constitution—the document's famous first **fifty-two words**—**introduces** everything that is to follow in the Constitution's **seven articles** and **twenty-seven amendments**. It proclaims **who** is adopting this Constitution: "We the People of the United States." It describes **why** it is being adopted—the purposes behind the enactment of America's charter of government. And it describes **what** is being adopted: "*this Constitution*"—a single authoritative written text to serve as fundamental law of the land....

The word "preamble," while accurate, does not quite capture the full importance of this provision. "Preamble" might be taken—we think wrongly—to imply that these words are merely an opening rhetorical flourish or frill without meaningful effect. To be sure, "preamble" usefully conveys the idea that this provision does not itself confer or delineate powers of government or rights of citizens. Those are set forth in the substantive articles and amendments that follow in the main body of the Constitution's text. It was well understood at the time of enactment that preambles in legal documents were not themselves substantive provisions and thus should not be read to contradict, expand, or contract the document's substantive terms.

But that does not mean the Constitution's Preamble lacks its own legal force. Quite the contrary, it is the provision of the document that declares the **enactment** of the provisions that follow. Indeed, the Preamble has sometimes been termed the "Enacting Clause" of the Constitution, in that it declares the fact of adoption of the Constitution (once sufficient states had ratified it): "We the People of the United States . . . *do ordain and establish* this Constitution for the United States of America."

I am not suggesting a precise correlation between the eighteenth-century U.S. Constitution and the eighth-century (BC!) New Covenant introduced by God in Jeremiah 31. Still less am I proposing that Jeremiah 31:31–34 is a technical, formal preamble to an ANE covenant. What I am suggesting is that the passage *functions* in a way that is similar to a preamble—a brief, introductory prologue to a much larger, detailed covenantal arrangement—and that to treat it as the whole, or even the sum and substance, of that larger body of highly detailed covenantal material is to seriously misconstrue the nature and content of that covenant. To that end, parallels in the rewrite below are suggestive and conceptually helpful. My substitutions for the sake of comparison are underlined.

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<sup>107</sup> "The Preamble"; <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/preamble/interpretations/37>.

The Preamble of the New Covenant—the document’s famous first **seventy-three** [Hebrew] **words**—introduces everything that is to follow in the Covenant’s ten major passages and twenty-four provisions. It proclaims **who** is adopting this Covenant: “Behold the days are coming, says the LORD, when I.” It describes **why** it is being adopted: “not like the covenant I made with your fathers . . . which covenant they broke.” And it describes **what** is being adopted: “a New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah”—a single authoritative written text to serve as fundamental law of the land.

The word “preamble,” while accurate, does not quite capture the full importance of this provision. “Preamble” might be taken—we think wrongly—to imply that these words are merely an opening rhetorical flourish or frill without meaningful effect. To be sure, “preamble” usefully conveys the idea that this provision does not itself confer or delineate all the provisions of that covenant. Those are set forth in the substantive articles . . . that follow in the main body of the Covenant’s text. It was well understood at the time of enactment that **preambles in legal documents . . . should not be read to contradict . . . or contract the covenant’s substantive terms.**

**But that does not mean the Covenant’s Preamble lacks its own legal force.** Quite the contrary, it is the provision of the document that **declares the *enactment* of the provisions that follow**. Indeed, the Preamble might be termed the “Enacting Clause” of the Covenant, in that it declares the fact of adoption of the Covenant: “I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.”

It is true that Jeremiah 31:33–34 does begin to delineate some of the leading provisions of the covenant itself. But this is only by way of contrast to the former covenant (“*not like* the covenant that I made with your fathers . . . *but this* is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel”) and only in the broadest of terms compared with the detailed provisions that emerge in this and the other New Covenant texts.

To cite the Preamble to the Constitution as though it comprehensively expressed the sum and substance of the entire document would be a misleading oversimplification and lead to assumptions and interpretations never intended by the original writers. The authors’ statement that “preambles . . . should not be read to contradict . . . or contract the document’s substantive terms” is a telling observation. Similarly, theologians who routinely proof-text the New Covenant with only Jeremiah 31:31–34, as though it comprehensively expresses the sum and substance of the entire covenant, overlook the covenant’s breadth and complexity, and reinforce misperceptions unintended by the original Author. In this case, Jeremiah 31:31–34 “should not be read to contradict . . . or contract the covenant’s substantive terms” detailed in the rest of Jeremiah 31, 32, 33 and all the other New Covenant passages. The best way to correct such misperceptions about the New Covenant is to read its contents and provisions holistically.

The fact that Hebrews 8 cites only 31:31–34 does not prove that it represents the entire New Covenant, but that it introduces the replacement of the old covenant and inaugurates the soteriological features of the New Covenant operable in the NT era (both of these being major themes in the

theology of Hebrews). What a NT writer does *not* quote may be as important as what he does quote, in terms of signaling fulfillment (cf. Jesus' conspicuously incomplete quotation of Isa 61:1–2 in Luke 4:17–21).

*Appendix 4*  
*“Israel-Specific”: An Illustration*

Suppose I walk into my NT theology class six weeks into the semester—long enough for them to begin to weary under the load of work I have imposed on them—and announce: “The day is coming, O my NT theology class, when I will receive a large inheritance check. In that day, I will (1) give each of you \$1,000, (2) take all of you out to a really nice restaurant for dinner, and (3) cancel all failing grades and award each of you an ‘A’ in NT theology.” Naturally, they’re pretty excited.<sup>108</sup>

Then one day they start hearing rumors that I gave everyone in my apologetics class \$1,000, and even took that class out to dinner to a really nice restaurant—even though I never made any such promise to my apologetics class. Have I been unrighteous to do what I did for my apologetics class? No. Does that mean that I have fulfilled the promises I made? No, not until I do for my NT theology students everything I promised to *them*. Suppose I give the NT theology students \$1,000 each and a gift card to a really nice restaurant—have I discharged my promise? Again, no.

You could say the fulfillment has begun, or that the promise has been inaugurated. But it will not be finally fulfilled until the eschaton of the semester when I actually turn in an “A” for their final grade in NT theology. And yet there’s one thing that I have not done—and *cannot* do—for the apologetics students. I cannot give them an “A” in NT theology because they’re not NT theology students. That promise is “class-specific”; NT theology students are the *only* ones for whom I can fulfill that particular promise. There’s simply no academically legitimate way I can give apologetics students an “A” in NT theology.<sup>109</sup>

The fact that the majority of the New Covenant promises are Israel-specific means that they simply have no hermeneutically legitimate way of being applied to Gentiles. God never brought my ancestors out of Egypt and made a covenant with them (Jer 31:32), promised them a specific piece of real estate (Ezek 36:28), or divided them into two separate nations (Ezek 37:15–22). Yet all of these are part and parcel of the New Covenant.

Here’s the larger point. The fact that the New Covenant was made with Israel does not mean its benefits cannot be extended to others. God will be gracious to whom he chooses to be gracious and can extend his saving mercy to anyone he wants. But it does mean that what he promised must still be fulfilled as stated to those to whom it was made. At the heart of the trustworthiness of the New Covenant is the trustworthiness of God not to mislead in the terms he uses, the reliability of his words as stated, and his ability to bring it to pass exactly what he promised as he promised it and to whom he promised it.

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<sup>108</sup> Note to students: This is purely hypothetical; do not expect this in any of my classes. Ever.

<sup>109</sup> Obviously the analogy is neither exact nor exhaustive. The parallel to the New Covenant would perhaps be closer if some of the NT theology students had, say, received the cash while others had neglected to come by my office to pick it up (hard to imagine, I know, but then so is the rejection of a freely offered salvation).



*Appendix 5*  
*The Land Promise in the OT*

<b>Book</b>	<b>Reference</b>
<b>Pentateuch</b>	
Genesis	12:7; 13:14–17; 15:7, 18; 15:8; 17:8; 24:7; 26:3; 28:4, 13; 35:12; 50:24
Exodus	6:8; 12:25; 13:5, 11; 32:13; 33:1
Numbers	11:12; 13:2; 14:23
Deuteronomy	1:8, 21, 35; 4:1; 6:3, 8, 10, 23; 7:13; 8:1; 9:5, 28; 10:11; 11:9, 21; 12:1; 19:8; 26:15; 27:3; 28:11; 30:5, 20; 31:7, 20; 34:2
<b>Historical Books</b>	
Joshua	1:6; 5:6; 18:3; 21:43; 23:5
Judges	2:1
1 Kings	8:34, 40, 48; 14:15; 21:8
2 Chronicles	6:25, 31; 20:7
Nehemiah	9:23, 36
<b>Prophetic Books</b>	
Jeremiah	3:18; 7:7; 11:5; 16:15; 24:10; 25:5; 30:3; 32:22; 35:15
Ezekiel	20:42; 36:28; 37:25; 47:14

*Note:* I employed multiple search parameters to locate over sixty references; but I am sure I have not found all of them.