

Jeremiah Lecture Notes—Spring 2011
Hope in the New Covenant
Jeremiah 31-33

Jeremiah 31:15-20—The Weeping Mother Will Be Heard

^{JER 31:15} This is what the LORD says:

“A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.”

^{JER 31:16} This is what the LORD says: “Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears,
for your work will be rewarded,” declares the LORD.

“They will return from the land of the enemy.

^{JER 31:17} So there is hope for your future,” declares the LORD.

“Your children will return to their own land.

^{JER 31:18} “I have surely heard Ephraim's moaning:

‘You disciplined me like an unruly calf, and I have been disciplined.

Restore me, and I will return, because you are the LORD my God.

^{JER 31:19} After I strayed, I repented; after I came to understand, I beat my breast.

I was ashamed and humiliated because I bore the disgrace of my youth.’

^{JER 31:20} Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight?

Though I often speak against him, I still remember him.

Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him,” declares the LORD.

--These verses begin with the mourning and weeping of Rachel. Rachel, as the mother of Joseph, is the mother of Israel. Her mourning is for “her children,” although this is obviously metaphorical language referring to all the children of Israel. As a mother, nothing can comfort her, since she has lost her children. This is certainly a reference to exile, not death per se.

--The reference to “Ramah” has elicited some discussion from scholars. Most scholars recognize this as a reference to the town of Ramah, just north of Jerusalem, as did the LXX. The problem is that Ramah is never associated with Rachel, although 1 Sam. 10:2 places her burial in Benjamin, near Ramah. Otherwise, her burial is always placed near Bethlehem. This was the connection made in Matt. 2:18, where the gospel writer quoted the LXX.

--While most would agree with LXX in translating the word as the place name “Ramah,” Holladay has recently argued rather vehemently that the translation, “height,” is preferable.

The Hebrew word *ramah* (רָמָה), is a place name, but the term also means “height,” “hill,” or even “high place” (see *BDB*). Holladay bases his argument on the lack of the article in Jer. 31:15, while all but one other instance of the Hebrew name is accompanied by the article. Lundbom argues that the Masoretes pointed it as a noun, not as a name.¹ Furthermore, Jerome translated (in the Vulgate) Jer. 31:15 with *in excelsio* (“in the highest”), but followed the LXX quotation in Matt. 2:18.² While Holladay’s arguments are in the definite minority, they do make sense. One might ask whether Matthew has unduly influenced Christian interpreters in their translation and interpretation.

--Ephraim’s “moaning” (v. 18) is an extension of Rachel’s weeping, since Rachel was Ephraim’s grandmother. While Rachel mourns the loss of her children, Ephraim “moans” in shame and humiliation because of his (collectively, of course) sins. This is an act of

¹ Jack Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36*, Anchor Bible, vol. 21b, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 436.

² Holladay, *Jeremiah 2*, 186-187.

repentance before God. This repentance is the return to God for which He has been waiting. Unfortunately, it comes after exile.

--In v. 19, NIV's "beat my breast" is more correctly, "struck his thigh," which was an gesture of remorse.³

--In Jer. 31:16-18a, 20, the LORD announces His intention to return the children to their own land. In verse 20, Ephraim is the child, presumably the child of Rachel, but now also the child of God. God now proclaims His love and compassion for his son. The judgment is over, and he will return home.

--Ephraim has been disciplined "like an unruly calf." Now he recognizes his sin, and his need for disciplines. He now "repents." The Hebrew word *shuv* (שוב) is used five times in 31:16-19, both referring to Ephraim's repentance and the LORD's returning of the people to their home.

Jeremiah 31:27-30—The Individual Must Pay, and Be Renewed?

JER 31:27 "The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will plant the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the offspring of men and of animals. ²⁸ Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant," declares the LORD.

²⁹ "In those days people will no longer say, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.'

JER 31:30 Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes--his own teeth will be set on edge."

-- As a prelude to the New Covenant in the next passage, the prophet delivers an oracle of hope in these verses. Verse 28 would appear to be an important verse in the Book of Jeremiah, returning to the call narrative and incorporating much of that commission into this verse. As such, it may function as a summary of Jeremiah's work.

--First, the words of the commission are repeated here, "uproot," "tear down," "overthrow," "destroy," "build," and "plant." The term, "bring disaster," is added to these. This extra word is related to a (the?) favorite word of Jeremiah, *ra`ah* (רָעָה).

--Second, the wordplay on the Hebrew term *shaqad* (שָׁקַד, "to watch") returns. In the call narrative, the wordplay involved the words for almond tree and "watch," with the LORD promising to "watch" His people in order to bring judgment upon them for their sins. Here, the LORD promises that, just as He "watched" over them for judgment, He will now "watch" over them for deliverance. The judgment oracle is reversed. Unfortunately, as in the previous oracle, the reversal comes only after exile!

--In v. 30, the prophet turns around the proverb in 31:29 (used here and in Ez. 18:2), in order to stress individual accountability before God. The source of the proverb is unknown, but since both Jeremiah and Ezekiel quote it, the reader should presume that it was a known proverb in the 7th-6th century BC. The emphasis here is on the responsibility of the individual before God. This verse is an excellent precursor to the New Covenant, which will be both communal and individual. Individual hearts will change, allowing the community to remain faithful.

³ See Fretheim, 435, 447-448.

Jeremiah 31:31-34—The New Covenant

JER 31:31 “The time is coming,” declares the LORD,

“when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

JER 31:32 It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers

when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt,

because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD.

JER 31:33 “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD.

“I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God, and they will be my people.

JER 31:34 No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’

because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD.

“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

--The reader should note that there are no stipulations in the “New Covenant.” Does that mean that the members of that covenant have no obligations? No, it means that the burden of keeping the covenant is laid upon Yahweh. He will give Israel a new heart and a new spirit. This covenant is not dependent upon what Israel does or does not do, but upon what Yahweh does.⁴ Its existence does not depend upon the success of the people.

--Why does Israel and Judah need a new covenant?

--Though Israel and Judah were the LORD’s own people, loved like a spouse, Israel and Judah broke the covenant. In fact, history shows that Israel and Judah continually broke the covenant, even ignoring the prophets sent to call them back to faithfulness.

--What is new?

--No specific stipulations—As mentioned above, the new covenant does not include specific requirements from those receiving it. This probably does not mean that obedience to God was not expected (see below), but that the very nature of the covenant expectations was changed.

--Internal—The covenant will not be written on stone, but on the heart. It will not be placed in the Ark of the Covenant, but in their minds. If the covenant is to remain unbroken, then something must change within its recipients.

--The law here refers not only to the Torah of the Pentateuch, but to the much broader “will of God.” Knowing God has to do with knowing his ways and His will for His people.⁵

--“They will know me.” The relationship will be real in intimate. The old covenant was broken for lack of knowledge. This will not happen with the new.

--“Knowing” probably contains the expectation of obedience, as in other texts. To know Yahweh was to obey Yahweh. Because the law will be written upon the heart, the people will have the “will” to obey it⁶, or the motivation to obey it.⁷

⁴ Phillip J. Swanson, “Exegesis: Jeremiah 24:7; 31:31-34 and 32:36-44,” an unpublished paper submitted to Dr. Waylon Bailey, Jeremiah-Ezekiel Th.D. Seminary, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986.

⁵ T. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 443; see also, G. Keown, P. Scalise, and T. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1993), 134.

⁶ J. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 469.

--Individualistic—While Jeremiah (and any OT prophet, for that matter) can never escape the nationalistic attitudes of Hebrew life, the “new covenant” perceptibly shifts from a purely nationalistic concept to an individualistic context.⁸

--John Skinner, in his classic work, *Prophecy and Religion*, suggests that by the term New Covenant, Jeremiah means a “new religious relationship.” He finds in this new relationship a synthesis of two tendencies that run through the eschatological words of Jeremiah (and other parts of the OT, for that matter). The first is a clinging to “the national idea,” which was the only form of religion the prophet could have been expected to understand. The second is conceiving of a religion that is a direct contact between the individual soul and God. The reader finds both represented in the New Covenant.⁹ What is new, of course, is the individualistic emphasis.

--Forgiveness of sins—While sin will still characterize the lives of the people, God will do a new work of forgiveness. This forgiveness “will regularly take hold in their lives and the past shall not be remembered.”¹⁰ Forgiveness is actually the grounds for the new covenant, rather than obedience to stipulations.¹¹

--Lundbom argues that this was the “really new” element in the “New Covenant.” In the former covenant (Sinai), there was no forgiveness of sin. As formulated especially in Deuteronomy, obedience to the covenant brought blessing, but disobedience brought curses. Josh. 24:19-20 sums up this former attitude: Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.” While it is true that the Holiness Code of Leviticus does provide for forgiveness of sins, the tradition of judgment, not forgiveness, was certainly prevalent in ancient Israel, particularly in the Deuteronomic circles of Jeremiah.¹²

--The New Covenant and the New Testament

--Lundbom notes that the New Testament contains relatively few references to the “New Covenant,” especially since the church (from its early history) saw itself as the new covenant people of God. One possible reason for this could be that in early Judaism, as evidenced in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the term “covenant” had legalistic connotations, and to keep the covenant meant exclusively obedience to the law. The Dead Sea Scrolls sect, for example, viewed itself as the people of the new, eternal covenant.¹³ This emphasis in 1st century Judaism may well have caused a reticence among NT writers to emphasize the term that the later church utilized so freely.

⁷ W. Bailey, *The New Covenant in Jeremiah and Ezekiel*, an unpublished Th.D. dissertation presented to the faculty of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1976.

⁸ W. Bailey, “The New Covenant in Jeremiah,” *The Theological Educator* (Fall, 1981).

⁹ John Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion: Studies in the Life of Jeremiah* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), 328-333.

¹⁰ Fretheim, 450.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 449.

¹² Lundbom, 470-471.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 473-474.

--Jesus and Paul reference the "New Covenant." Jesus calls His work "the new covenant in my blood" in Luke 22:20, at the Last Supper. Paul calls the Corinthian laity "ministers of a new covenant" (2 Cor. 3:6). In Romans, Paul states concerning the upright Gentiles that "have the requirements of the law written upon their hearts" (Rom. 2:14-15), followed by the promise of a new inner motivation to know and do the Law. Paul further states that "all Israel will be saved," including upright Gentiles, and "this will be my covenant with them, when I will take away their sins" (Rom. 11:25-32). Lundbom argues that Paul is truly saying that the covenant is for everyone, giving Jeremiah's prophecy its most inclusive meaning.¹⁴

--The Book of Hebrews quotes this passage of Jeremiah twice, both times arguing that Jesus has inaugurated this "New Covenant." Jer. 31:31-34 is quoted in its entirety in Heb. 8:8-12. The author of Hebrews is clearly arguing that the old covenant of Moses is obsolete, while the new of Jesus is eternal and effective.¹⁵

--Brueggemann has argued that the author of Hebrews has distorted the meaning of Jeremiah's new covenant by making it a supercessionist text. He argues that "Jeremiah 31:31-34 looks not to a displacement of Judaism but to a reconstitution of Judaism in a mode of glad obedience to the God of the Torah."¹⁶ In fact, the New Testament seems to teach that Brueggemann is correct, but that the "reconstitution of Judaism" occurred through the effective work of Jesus.

--Skinner on Jeremiah, the New Covenant, and the New Testament—In conclusion, and in contrast to Brueggemann, below are John Skinner's concluding thoughts in his discussion of the New Covenant.

--"[Jeremiah's] peculiar contribution to the prophetic hope is that thought of a direct action of God on the heart of each Israelite, bringing it into harmony with His own character and will. He may not have seen that this thought must burst the bond of nationality, and be fulfilled in an invisible fellowship of spirits based on that knowledge of God which he knew to be the ultimate reality of religion. But in projecting his own personal experience into the future as the form which true religion must assume universally, he threw a bright beam of light across the ages; and it falls at last on One who is the Yea and the Amen to all the promises of God—on Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant, and the Author of eternal salvation."¹⁷

Jeremiah 33:14-18

--J.P. Hyatt calls this passage a quote of Jer. 23:5-6 with commentary. He believes that the text is of a post-exilic origin, written when the Jewish people needed encouragement regarding the continuation of the Davidic kingship and Levitical priesthood.¹⁸ Whether the interpreter accepts the late origin of the text or not, the relationship between Jer. 33:14-18 and 23:5-6 is obvious. Jer. 33:14-26 is lacking in the LXX, which could suggest a late origin for the text.¹⁹ However,

¹⁴ Ibid., 476-477.

¹⁵ Ibid., 478-479.

¹⁶ W. Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 189.

¹⁷ Skinner, 334.

¹⁸ J.P. Hyatt, "Jeremiah: Introduction and Exegesis," *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 5, ed. G.A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), 1051-1052.

¹⁹ See Bright, *Jeremiah*, Anchor Bible, 297.

the differences between the LXX and MT could simply reflect textual tradition and not originality.

JER 33:14 “‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will fulfill the gracious promise I made to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah.

JER 33:15 “‘In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land.

JER 33:16 In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.

This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness.’

JER 33:17-18 For this is what the LORD says: ‘David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, nor will the priests, who are Levites, ever fail to have a man to stand before me continually to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings and to present sacrifices.’”

--Jer. 33:14-16

--Note that the promises here are for the whole nation, Israel and Judah. The people of God will be reunited into a whole again.

--Jer. 33:15-16 are a doublet of 23:5-6, with only a shift in emphasis. A new king, who will rule with justice and righteousness, is promised for Judah and Israel. Here, however, the name, “Yahweh Our Righteousness,” is given to Jerusalem rather than the new king. Thompson interpreted this difference to emphasize that Jerusalem will “so manifest the qualities of justice and righteousness that she would be worthy of such a name and exemplify the divine order for all the cities and all the people in Israel.”²⁰

--Jer. 33:17-18

--These verses reiterate the standing promise of God concerning the Davidic dynasty and the Levitical priesthood. The exile and the destruction of Jerusalem has not cancelled these promises. The emphasis on the priesthood is an addition to the promise of 23:5-6. This addition could suggest a late origin of the passage, when the importance of the priesthood increased after the exile; but it could also simply be a reminder that the priest was necessary, just as a king was essential.

²⁰ J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT, ed. R.K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 601.