

PAUL'S USE OF JEREMIAN "NEW COVENANT" IN 2 COR. 3:6

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Introduction

It has been accepted in the biblical scholarship that texts from the Old Testament play a double role when spoken in view of the New Testament. The Old Testament texts are, on the one hand, sometimes quoted *verbatim* in the New Testament. On the other hand, to borrow what H. Lalleman says, "they [the Old Testament texts] may also have shaped the wording, choices, thinking and theology of a New Testament author without him being conscious of it."¹ The test case in our discussion in this paper is the Book of Jeremiah in the Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians. The 'new covenant' phrase of Jer. 31:31-34 was used only by two groups in antiquity – the Essene Community at Qumran and the early Christians.² Among the New Testament writings, we find its reference directly or indirectly at least ten times in the texts of Mt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:20; Rom. 11:27; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:8-12; 9:15; 10:16-17; 12:24.

¹Hetty Lalleman, "Paul's Self-Understanding in the Light of Jeremiah: A Case Study into the Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament," in Jamie A. Grant, Alison Lo & Gordon J. Wenham (eds.), *A God of Faithfulness: Essays in Honour of J. Gordon McConville on His 60th Birthday* (NY: T&T Clark, 2011), 97.

²Thomas R. Blanton, *Constructing a New Covenant: Discursive Strategies in the Damascus Document and Second Corinthians* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 1.

It seems Paul is quite acquainted with the Jeremian text because Jeremian terminologies find their explicit mention in his writings, as e.g. the terminology of 'boasting' (compare Jer. 9:23-24 with 1 Cor. 1:31 & 2 Cor. 10:17) and 'building up and tearing down' (Jer. 1:10; 2 Cor. 13:10) to mention a few. We assume that the Jeremian phrase is a source of Paul's idea of the 'new covenant.' In this short paper, we first try to devote some space in showing how the prophet Jeremiah has an influence on Paul. In so doing, we then take a look at the 'new covenant' terminology in the Book of Jeremiah. In the next section, we analyse the 'new covenant' as mentioned in 2 Cor. 3:6 to expound what Paul might have meant when he wrote his second letter to the Christian community at Corinth.

I. Jeremiah in Paul's Thinking

We will first devote our attention to the question whether or not Paul had in the back of his mind Jer. 31:31-34 when he wrote about the 'new covenant' in 2 Cor. 3:6. Or was Paul influenced by the Jeremian text in his idea of the 'new covenant'? Among others, H. Räisänen is vehemently opposed to the idea of any influence of the Jeremian text on the mind of Paul. Räisänen would see three simple arguments for his proposal. Firstly, Paul does not make any mention of Jeremiah in his writing. Secondly, Paul did not have to base on the Jeremian text since the Eucharistic tradition already had this concept of which he makes a mention in 1 Cor. 11:25. Räisänen is sceptical if the Eucharistic tradition in its turn was influenced by Jer. 31:31-34. Thirdly, neither the Qumran Community nor did the early Christians take up the idea of Jer. 31:31-34. According to him, "we hear nothing of either the law being written in the hearts of the people or of the spontaneous knowledge of the Lord that renders all admonition superfluous. There is none of this in 2 Cor. 3:6 ff. either ... The prediction of Jeremiah plays no part in v. 6 ff..."³

In line with Räisänen are C. Wolff and D. A. Koch. According to Wolff, 2 Cor. 3:6 is based on the Exodus tradition. He contends that Jeremiah neither made any mention to the Spirit nor to its life-

³Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983), 242-243, 245.

giving work. For Koch, Paul took up the concept from his Eucharistic tradition. Koch is very straight-forward in his rejection of the idea of any influence of Jeremiah or Ezekiel in the letters of Paul.⁴

J. Lambrecht accentuates that one cannot deny the influence of Jer. 31:31-34 on 2 Cor. 3:6, even when it is well known that Paul was acquainted with this phrase from the Eucharistic tradition. For Lambrecht, "Paul's conviction regarding God's work in Christ, his own ministry, and the identity of Christian life: all of it is the fulfillment of the spiritual newness of the covenant prophesied by Jeremiah..."⁵ Arguing for the term *kainos* (new) instead of *neos*, which although are used interchangeably in the LXX, M. Thrall suggests that the source of this phrase 'new covenant' (*kainē diathēkē*) in 2 Cor. 3:6 actually comes from Jer. 31 as well as from the Eucharistic tradition.⁶ We might also remark that Paul, a devout Jew, well educated in the Law (cf. Acts 22:3), must have been well-versed not only in the Torah but in the Hebrew Bible as such. Therefore, references to Jeremianic terminologies finding their place in his letters would not be out of question. If then Paul uses this phrase from the prophet Jeremiah, what was the meaning of 'new covenant' in this prophecy?

II. The New Covenant in Jeremiah

'Covenant' (*b'riyt*) is a term that finds its mention quite frequently in the Old Testament. However, 'new covenant' (*b'riyt h'dašah*) is found only once, in the Book of Jeremiah. The 'new

⁴Christian Wolff, *Jeremia im Frühjudentum und Urchristentum*, TUGAL 118 (Berlin: Akademie Verl., 1976), 131-142; Dietrich-Alex Koch, *Die Schrift als Zeuge des Evangeliums: Untersuchungen zur Verwendung und zum Verständnis der Schrift bei Paulus*, BHT 69 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1986), 45-ff. See also Scott J. Hafemann, *Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel: The Letter/Spirit Contrast and the Argument from Scripture in 2 Corinthians 3*, WUNT 81 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1995), 120. Cf. also L. Gaston, *Paul and the Torah*, WUNT 29 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1983), 240-245. Gaston too denies any influence of the 'new covenant' from the Prophet.

⁵Jan Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, SPS 8 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 43 & 47.

⁶Margret E. Thrall, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 233.

covenant' promised in Jeremiah is different from the Sinaitic Covenant, for "it will not be like the covenant which I (YHWH) made..." (Jer. 31:32). But how does it actually differ? The Jeremian phrase 'new covenant' has been looked at differently by different biblical scholars. Some of them are of the opinion that Jeremiah does not repudiate the content of Sinai Covenant. According to G. von Rad, the 'new covenant' in Jer. 31 does not nullify by any means the Law given at Mount Sinai.⁷ In a similar vein, R. Clements contends that it is only a new way of knowing and obeying the Law that was already given to Moses. The main thrust, according to Clements, is "upon the willingness to obey the known law."⁸

Others, however, see a genuine newness in the 'new covenant' of Jeremiah. According to J. Lundbom, three distinctive marks of this 'new covenant' can be seen in this regard. Firstly, it is unconditional. Secondly, its inscription is not on the tablets but hearts. Thirdly and most importantly, "it will be grounded in a wholly new act of divine grace, i.e., the forgiveness of sins."⁹ F. Adeyemi would stress that this 'new covenant' in Jeremiah surpasses all other covenants which were known in the ancient Near East. According to Adeyemi, this divine act would lead Israel to the real knowledge of YHWH. Through this knowledge Israel will "have a right relationship with Him in the absolute sense..."¹⁰ This knowledge entails that there would be no need for the Israelites to teach each other about YHWH. More so, not only the Israelites, but everyone in the nation will obey this 'new covenant.'¹¹

We could agree in line with von Rad and others that the 'new covenant' in Jeremiah does not intend to convey the repudiation of the Sinai Covenant. On the contrary, it is this very Sinai Covenant that will be "written on the hearts." In this regard, it is not the question of replacing the former with the new one. The distinction

⁷Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (NY: Harper & Row, 1962), 213.

⁸Ronald E. Clements, *Jeremiah* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 191.

⁹Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36* AB 21B (NY: Doubleday, 2004), 466.

¹⁰Femi Adeyemi, "What is the New Covenant 'Law' in Jeremiah 31:33?" *BS* 163, 651 (2006): 317-318.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 318, 320.

between the two covenants remains "a contrast between the two different *conditions of the people* who are brought into these covenants and their correspondingly different responses to the *same law*."¹²

How was the 'new covenant' understood in the Second Temple period? Did the Qumran community see it as something evidently different from the covenant already extant? Although the "sectarian" regarded themselves as "the men of the new covenant,"¹³ in what S. McKnight would suggest, they viewed the 'new covenant' as "an extension of the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 19–24) and Deuteronomy (12–26)."¹⁴ Put differently, the 'new covenant' understood in the Second Temple period was that of the Mosaic Covenant in that the community stressed on fulfilling the demands of the Torah.¹⁵

III. The New Covenant in 2 Cor. 3:6

Chapter 3 of 2 Corinthians has been seen as "one of the most interesting portions."¹⁶ The interesting section for us consists in the fact that Paul inserts a phrase in his letter that has given occasion to many a scholarly writing on the issue. As stated above, in the New Testament, the 'new covenant' terminology finds its reference also in the Pauline corpus, 2 Cor. 3:6 being one such instance, which states that God "has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life" (RSV).

¹²Scott Hafemann, "The 'Temple of the Spirit' as the Inaugural Fulfillment of the New Covenant within the Corinthian Correspondence," *Ex auditu* 12 (1996): 32. See also Bernard P. Robinson, "Jeremiah's New Covenant: Jer 31, 31-34," *SJOT* 15, 2 (2001): 195.

¹³Frank Moore Cross, Jr., *The Ancient Library of Qumran* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1958), 56, 58, 164; Géza Vermès, *Discovery in the Judean Desert* (NY: Desclee, 1956), 44-61.

¹⁴Scot McKnight, "Covenant and Spirit: The Origins of the New Covenant Hermeneutic," in Graham N. Stanton, Bruce W. Longenecker & Stephen C. Barton (eds.), *The Holy Spirit and Christian Origins: Essays in Honour of James D. G. Dunn* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 50.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶W.C. van Unnik, "'With Unveiled Face.' An Exegesis of 2 Corinthians iii 12-18," *NT* 6, 2 (1963): 153.

The Greek term covenant (*diathēkē*) is generally understood in 4 different ways:

- a) As an order or institution
- b) As last will or testament
- c) As an agreement or a treaty
- d) As an ordinance or disposition.¹⁷

The LXX, however, translates (270 times) *diathēkē* (covenant) in terms of the Hebrew term *b'riyt*, which connotes an agreement not among equals, i.e., in unilateral terms.¹⁸ Of the 30 occurrences of the term *diathēkē*, nine are found in the Pauline corpus (cf. Rom. 9:4; 11:27; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6, 14; Gal. 3:15, 17; 4:24 and Eph. 2:12). With the exception of Gal. 3:15 and Heb. 9:16-17, where it is used as will or testament, in all other 28 instances, the term is rendered as covenant.¹⁹

How and why does the phrase 'new covenant' find its mention in 2 Cor. 3:6? Paul used this phrase out of a necessary situation at Corinth. The background of 'new covenant' in this text is Paul's defence of his own Gospel ministry to the Corinthians against his opponents. This mandate Paul has received from God Himself. According to scholars, Paul wants to answer 'strangers' who came to Corinth with some sort of "impressive *letter of introduction* from churches elsewhere, and were trying to discredit Paul himself."²⁰ Paul is convinced that the faithful at Corinth are his

¹⁷J. Behm, "The Greek Term *diathēkē*," in Gerhard Kittel & Gerhard Friedrich (eds.), trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 124.

¹⁸Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 270.

¹⁹H. Hegemann, "*diathēkē*," in Horst Balz & Gerhard Schneider (eds.), *The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 300.

²⁰Margret E. Thrall, *I and II Corinthians*, CBC (Cambridge: University Press, 1965), 131. On the question of who the opponents were, cf. D. Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), esp. 27-38, 101-110; see also Reimund Bieringer, "Paul's Divine Jealousy: The Apostle and His Communities in Relationship," in Reimund Bieringer & Jan Lambrecht (eds.), *Studies on 2 Corinthians*, BETL 112 (Leuven: University Press, 1994), esp. 250-251.

very letter of legitimacy which certifies that he is an authentic apostle. In his effort to reiterate what Corinthians meant for him, Paul draws their attention to the letter written in the hearts, not on the tablets of stones, which indeed they were for him. As he makes this connecting point, he takes up the metaphor of letter and extends it further.²¹ In this regard, he brings in the idea of the 'new covenant,' which is distinct from the one made by YHWH on Mount Sinai. The Old Covenant, while it was written on stone tablets, served the Jews to know what YHWH wanted from them. In other words, written law was a guide for their religious and moral life. Since knowledge of YHWH and His commands came only from the inscribed law, the relationship between God and the people too remained an impersonal one, a second-hand, so to say.²² Now through the ministry of the 'new covenant,' the Holy Spirit makes this God-man relationship a personal and life-giving one.

The concept of the 'new covenant' does not come out of the blue in this text, however. Although not used elsewhere in this Letter, Lambrecht observes that "the idea of the 'new covenant' was present in Paul's mind already during the composition of 3,2-3...; and the double opposition of 'letter - spirit' and 'killing - life giving' explains the antithesis of 'ink-spirit of the living God' and 'stone-hearts of flesh'."²³ That is to say, allusions to the texts from Ex. 31:18; Jer. 31:33 and Ez. 36:26 give us a clue that Paul already contemplated on the comparison between the two covenants, and this comparison is continued in vv.7-11, which speak of the antithesis, and in vv.12-18, where he contrasts his ministry from that of Moses.²⁴

In his description of the antithesis of letter-spirit, Paul identifies the Spirit with the writing of the 'new covenant.' The 'letter covenant' is the Mosaic Law, which is external without supplying power for obedience. The 'new covenant' on the contrary provides

²¹Thrall, *I and II Corinthians*, 131.

²²*Ibid.*, 132.

²³Jan Lambrecht, "Structure and Line of Thought in 2 Cor 2,14-4,6," *Biblica* 64, 3 (1983): 353. Cf. also N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 176.

²⁴Paul Thorsell, "The Spirit in the Present Age: Preliminary Fulfillment of the Predicted New Covenant According to Paul," *JETS* 41, 3 (1998): 401.

this power for obedience. Concerning the anti-thesis of 'letter-spirit,' L. Belleville remarks

Letter and *Spirit* are therefore descriptive terms, setting forth the quality or nature of their respective covenants. What is qualitatively better about the new covenant is that it is not a *letter* covenant—that is, an external code—but a *Spirit* covenant—that is, an internal power. A covenant that is *letter* in nature *kills* because it makes external demands without giving the inward power for obedience, while a covenant that is *Spirit* in character gives *life* because it works internally to produce a change of nature.²⁵

In this way, contends C. Stockhausen, "the writing of the new covenant is the spirit of God... The spirit itself in all its manifestations is then the verification of the reality of the new covenant..."²⁶ Paul brings in this aspect by combining, more so, by applying the text of Ez. 36:26-27 to the Jeremian text. On account of its relationship with the Spirit, the 'new covenant' is spiritual in nature in contrast with the one made on Mount Sinai, which was written.²⁷ The 'new covenant' is spiritual in nature insofar as the written Law was "devoid of any life-giving Spirit and the Spirit himself."²⁸ In this context, Paul wants to show to the Corinthian community that his letter of recommendation is not a written but a spiritual one. Moreover, this 'new covenant' is operative through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Paul's ministry mediates the power of the Holy Spirit that brings life. The Holy Spirit removes the veil from the minds of the believers and transforms them "to reflect the glory of God."²⁹

On the issue of 'new covenant,' biblical scholarship has tried to present why Paul preferred the Greek term *kainos* to *neos* although both mean 'new'? Paul's intention of doing so must have been due to the fact that *kainos* could indicate newness in nature

²⁵Linda L. Belleville, *2 Corinthians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 94-95; see also Thorsell, "The Spirit in the Present Age," 404.

²⁶Carol Kern Stockhausen, *Moses' Veil and the Glory of the New Covenant: The Exegetical Substructure of II Cor. 3, 1-4,6*, *Analecta Biblica* 116 (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1986), 76.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 78.

²⁸Peter Richardson, "Spirit and Letter: A Foundation for Hermeneutics," *EQ* 45, 4 (1973): 211.

²⁹Thorsell, "The Spirit in the Present Age," 409.

or quality whereas *neos* could mean newness in time or origin.³⁰ C.E.B. Cranfield went a step further in remarking that *kainos* points more towards a theological significance.³¹ If we are to take Kittel's *TDNT* meaning of *neos*, which presents the meaning of the term as something brand new, "what was not there before,"³² we might get a peep into what Paul could have intended by the use of 'new covenant' in 2 Cor. 3:6. In using the phrase 'new covenant,' is Paul in any case, therefore, proposing or actually thinking of a new covenant that is different from the one in the Jeremian text? His citations from Jeremiah as well as from Ezekiel would only suggest against such a speculation. Had such been the case, postulates P. Thorsell, Paul would have expatiated on it.³³ We could say that Paul's idea of 'newness' could be in the sense of 'renewal' instead of a complete replacement. Quoting C. Hoegen-Rohls, E. Nathan notes that *kainos* "articulates the salvific newness that arises from the death of Jesus as 'the particular [thing] that is the point of the gospel.'" ³⁴

Many suggestions have been made that Paul brought in the idea of the 'new covenant' from the Mosaic Law discussion that must have taken place between Paul and his opponents in Corinth. T. Blanton is a strong advocate of such position. According to him, it was a "discussion of the Torah and a discussion of the spirit in relation to the Torah"³⁵ that propelled Paul to make a mention of the 'new covenant.' Paul makes a contrast between his ministry and that of Moses. While Moses' ministry had to do with the letter of the law that was engraved on stone tablets, Paul's ministry is associated with the Holy Spirit. By bringing in the antithesis of letter-spirit, Paul shows how letter kills whereas Spirit gives life.

³⁰Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 270.

³¹Cf. Thrall, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 233.

³²Johannas Behm, "*kainos*," in *TDNT*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 447.

³³Thorsell, "The Spirit in the Present Age," 403.

³⁴Cf. Emmanuel Nathan, "Paul Between Coherence and Contingency: Taking a Closer Look at Paul's Language in 2 Cor 3," (Unpublished) *Pauline Theology in the Making Seminar: SBL Annual Meeting* (New Orleans, 2009), 7.

³⁵Thomas R. Blanton, "Spirit and Covenant Renewal: A Theologoumenon of Paul's Opponents in 2 Corinthians," *JBL* 129, 1 (2010): 143.

Paul's rival missionaries must have appealed to the Torah that Paul had to explicitate on the superiority of the ministry of the 'new covenant' to that of the old, a theme that Paul develops in 2 Cor. 3:7-8. This argument of Blanton seems plausible as against those who would contend that Mosaic Law had nothing to do with the idea of the 'new covenant' that Paul speaks of in this letter.³⁶ According to McKnight, "for Paul, the *New Covenant* is a *pneumatic experience or an eschatological existence*, and the *New Covenant* is rooted in the *Abrahamic promise of justification by faith...the new covenant hermeneutic owes its origins to the pneumatic experiences of early Jerusalem-based followers of Jesus*."³⁷ In this new age when the believers have been endowed with the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is (emphasis added) the guiding factor in their obedience of the covenant.

While the characteristic marks of the old covenant are signified by Paul in terms such as 'death,' 'external,' fading,' 'resulting in condemnation,' the 'new covenant' "is characterized by life, is inner, is permanent, and results in righteousness."³⁸ In what C. Talbert suggests in line with Blanton, the understanding between the two types of covenants that Paul mentions in this letter should be inferred from his (Paul's) argument between his ministry and that of Moses.³⁹ It is, however, difficult to assume, as Talbert would postulate that Paul could have thought of the 'new covenant' as replacing the old one.⁴⁰ If such were the case, we could ask

³⁶Cf. also R. Martin whose contention is that "in 2 Corinthians there is a remarkable absence of key 'Judaizing' terms such as circumcision, Sabbath, [and] law." Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, WBC 40 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 336. See also Blanton, "Spirit and Covenant Renewal," 144. In line with Blanton, see also Robert B. Sloan, Jr., "2 Corinthians 2:14-4:6 and 'New Covenant Hermeneutics' – A Response to Richard Hays," *BBR* 5 (1995): 138-139.

³⁷McKnight, "Covenant and Spirit," 44, 51.

³⁸Charles H. Talbert, "Paul on the Covenant," *RE* 84, 2 (1987): 304.

³⁹*Ibid.* See also Wilber Wallis, who in his treatment of the theme "covenant" argues that the distinction Paul makes between the old and the new covenant does not consist in his discussion on the ministry of Moses and that of his own. On the contrary, "the basic dichotomy... lies between legalism and the gospel... Moses and Paul stand together against legalism." Wilber B. Wallis, "The Pauline Conception of the Old Covenant," *Presbyterian* 4, 2 (1978): 79.

⁴⁰Talbert, "Paul on the Covenant," 304.

ourselves if Paul really intended to completely break away from Judaism! This type of a supposition does not seem to hold water. If Jeremian 'new covenant' does not propose replacement of the old with the new, neither could have Paul's teaching meant something contrary to what Jeremiah prophesied.

For Paul, the 'new covenant' promise of the prophet Jeremiah is fulfilled in his ministry because he is a minister of the 'new covenant.' His 'new covenant' ministry is the ministry of the Spirit.⁴¹

Conclusion

In this short paper, we have tried to analyse the 'new covenant' phrase. The terminology is found only in the Book of Jeremiah in the Hebrew Bible. The New Testament writers, however, make use of this phraseology in a few instances, Pauline corpus being such example. In the aforementioned sections, we have tried to bring out that Paul is influenced by the phrase in his second letter to the Christians at Corinth in order to make his defence against the adversaries who questioned the authenticity of his ministry. Through his discussion on the two covenants,⁴² Paul shows that the 'old covenant' is epitomized by Mosaic Law whereas the 'new covenant,' whose minister he has been made by God Himself, is characterized by the Holy Spirit. Through the ministry of this 'new covenant,' it is possible to enter into a personal relationship with God and this inter-personal relationship is brought about by the working of the Holy Spirit. Although Paul uses the term 'new,' he might not have intended it to be something completely different, or replacing the old with the new. Since prophet Jeremiah is in the back of his mind, if the Prophet did not intend to suggest a completely 'new covenant,' neither could have been the intention of Paul to suggest something new.

⁴¹Hegermann, "*diathēkē*," 300.

⁴²Although we have made an attempt to expound on the 'new covenant' phrase as it appears in 2 Cor. 3:6, the question on the very term 'covenant' has not been elaborately treated here.