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Ted Goshorn

4/15/2016

A New (Non-Supersessionist) Covenant

Jeremiah 31, New Covenant, and Supersessionism

Ted Goshorn

Master of Divinity Thesis

Candler School of Theology | Emory University

April 6, 2015

Introduction

The idea of a new covenant has long undergirded conceptions of Christianity. For several early Christian authors, covenant formed a center of thought from which they sought to explain the relevance of Jesus by harmonizing the new Christ covenant with covenant understandings from the Hebrew scriptures. Such an approach yielded much supersessionist thought, for in explaining the relevance of the new covenant, ancient authors demeaned or outright denied earlier covenants with the Jews.

Supersessionism asserts that the covenant, as established by Christ for the salvation of humanity, has somehow replaced the covenant God made with the Jews or changed substantially the terms and conditions. For the ancients, a supersessionist perspective came naturally into the mix of their thought, remaining mostly unchallenged. While the ancients do not offer an interpretation without supersessionism, they do provide critical insight into how Christians first made sense of the nature of the covenant established by Christ. Such is vital for a modern Christian interpretation that remains true to the tradition but does not commit supersessionism.

Finding a modern interpretation without supersessionism begins by examining ancient and modern interpretations of Jeremiah 31:31-34. For the ancients, this formed a “locus classicus”¹ of understanding the new covenant. For contemporary scholars and preachers, it has remained central to explaining the nature and relevance of the Christ covenant. The establishment of a link between this Hebrew text and the covenant established by Christ,

¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., 1972. "The Old Promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-34." *Journal Of The Evangelical Theological Society* 15, no. 1: 11-23. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed September 30, 2014), 14.

however, quickly introduced supersessionist thought into Christianity; a reality that has remained into contemporary writings, both in scholarship and in preaching.

This particular text has proven popular for explaining the covenant established by Christ because of Jeremiah's referencing of a “new covenant.”² For many ancient and contemporary Christian scholars and preachers, Jesus is the creator of the new covenant outlined by Jeremiah, a covenant that replaces the old covenant made through Jewish patriarchs. Such an interpretation is clearly supersessionist, and yet it has remained the standard interpretation because it holds existential significance in defining what Jesus accomplished in death and resurrection. That definition states that Jeremiah forecasted the coming of Jesus, who would establish a new covenant under grace and not law, a covenant written on the hearts of the people; a new covenant established by the crucifixion and forecasted by Jesus through the giving of the bread and the cup at The Last Supper.

Given the standard supersessionist interpretation of Jeremiah 31 and resulting definition of new covenant, can the Jeremiah text and the idea of new covenant that it espouses be interpreted in such a way that is relevant for both Jews and Christians? The question has importance because it asks a question of the character of God, for both Jews and Christians, who accept Torah as scripturally authoritative, worship a God who is understood as always consistent, keeping promises, never failing.³ The task of interpretation for a Christian covenant requires squaring the nature of this God with the idea that God has done something “new” through the covenant established by Jesus.

² Jer. 31:31, Jewish Publication Society (JPS).

³ Num. 23:19, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), as an example of God's immutability as defined by Torah.

To address these interpretive questions around covenant, this paper will examine the earliest non-canonical Christian sources on the covenant established by Jesus and discussed by Jeremiah, comparing those sources with modern interpretation from scholars and preachers alike. This comparison will reveal strands of supersessionism that have remained in interpreting both Jeremiah and the new covenant, creating a need for a new interpretation. That new interpretation will come through an historical and exegetical examination of Jeremiah 31 and of the concept of new covenant. This examination will yield relevant perspectives for both faiths, for the idea of new covenant from the New Testament and Jeremiah's vision demonstrate together a harmony of covenantal perspective; namely, that God has written Godself on the hearts of all of humanity and, through Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection, opened the doors for humanity to find God there.

Ancient Sources of New Covenant Interpretation

Four patristic authors in particular approached the existential task of self-definition through explaining the nature of the covenant as established by Jesus Christ. Their explanations sought to demonstrate how the covenant was different in substantial ways from the covenants established by God with the Jews in order to create a Christian identity and address underlying existential angst. The nature of defining a new religion as distinct from another would seem to lead to the conclusion that these authors would increasingly define Christianity as excluding Judaism, and even any other religious system, in an effort to establish theirs as necessarily different. These authors who discuss the covenant of Christ, however, demonstrate exactly the opposite. Their arguments show an increase in inclusion of those of other faiths, especially of

Judaism, as they define the nature of the covenant established by Jesus, even while maintaining supersessionist perspectives. From the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* to Clement of Alexandria, they show that, within a strain of thought in early Christianity, self-definition remained supersessionist but moved the conversation about the Christ covenant from exclusivism to inclusivism.

The words exclusivism and inclusivism are particular to Christian theology and used here to describe a particular theology of religions as espoused by four early Christian authors: the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria. William C. Placher, in his anthology of Christian religion, helpfully defines these two modes of understanding.⁴ Exclusivism maintains that there is no salvation outside of Christianity; namely, that “those who remain non-Christians [will] all end up in hell.”⁵ Inclusivism alternatively holds that some salvation can be achieved outside of the Christian faith by “somehow believing and acting as Christians without realizing it.”⁶ While these are modern terms, they provide a helpful place to engage in conversation with the perspectives these four patristic authors posit.

What does change through their writings is the graciousness with which they approach their varying soteriology. They increasingly find that God’s salvation need not be limited, but humanity may instead find its way to salvation through Christ by different means than might otherwise be expected, a move noted above as inclusivism.

Because these authors did not write in response to each other, it cannot be assumed that this move from exclusivism to inclusivism is a purposeful rhetorical move by subsequent authors

⁴ William C. Placher, *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 300.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

to prove a larger point or answer a general existential question. It can be said, however, that such a willingness demonstrates a remarkable pattern, because it differs from the expected, given the realities of identity formation.

Christianity, like any organization, faced the existential challenge of differentiation; bringing “cohesiveness, clarity, and direction in the presence of confusion and mystery,”⁷ a state typical of any newly-formed organization. Organizational theory stipulates that any company of humans gathered together for a common purpose eventually develops myths, symbols, values, and vision that provide definition to the organization.⁸ The more the group finds that definition, the more it differentiates itself, and thus the more exclusive it becomes because it increasingly knows what it is not. Such is the reality of any organization.

The same move of increased differentiation leading to increased exclusivity comes in identity formation theories from psychology. At different stages of the lifespan, regardless of particular theory, individuals encounter challenges that cause cognitive dissonance.⁹ The resolution of this cognitive dissonance not only facilitates movement to the next stage of identity formation, but also defines the identity of the individual in greater detail, for now what was previously ambiguous has found specificity through definition, a situation that necessarily means greater, and more exclusive, understanding of self.

Christianity, as an organization seeking to form during this time both as an established organization and as a means of collective identity for thousands of adherents would, naturally,

⁷ Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 269.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Nancy J. Evans, Deanna S. Forney, and Florence Guido-DiBrito, *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 32-33.

follow these theoretical patterns that lead to increased differentiation and thus increased exclusivity. What the move from *Barnabas* to Clement of Alexandria shows, however, is exactly the opposite. They move instead toward inclusion, toward understanding God (though increasingly defined in Christian terms) as revealing Godself throughout the world, not exclusively through Christianity. In this way, they also show an understanding of God as relating to humanity through more than just Christ, even though all maintain Jesus as the best means of relationship.

Defining New Covenant in Christianity

This move from exclusivism to inclusivism comes through explaining the nature of the covenant established by Jesus as a means of defining Christianity, a way of bringing “cohesiveness, clarity, and direction in the presence of confusion and mystery,”¹⁰ to this newly forming religion. They did so through defining the nature of the covenantal relationship established by Christ between God and believers in God’s Son Jesus.¹¹ Petrus Gräbe notes that “[t]he concept of the new covenant is integral to differentiating Christianity from Judaism, offering at once a disassociation from Judaism (‘old-new’ terminology) *and* a link with it (covenantal theology).”¹² Patristic writers had this task of defining covenant as a means for creating a unique identity both because of the rapidly increasing Gentile population within Christian believers as well as because many outside of the faith considered Christianity a radical

¹⁰ Bolman and Deal, 269.

¹¹ Petrus Gräbe, *New Covenant New Community: The Significance of Biblical and Patristic Covenant Theology for Contemporary Understanding* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 182.

¹² *Ibid.*

sect of Judaism.¹³ Such self-definition through covenant was a difficult task, even for those who had fragments of New Testament writing, for the nine references to covenant in the New Testament (cf. Kaiser),¹⁴ when considered among the entire its entire corpus and other writings from the decades immediately following the resurrection, do not amount to a clear definition of covenant as related by Jesus.¹⁵

Defining covenant for Christians necessitated the task of early authors defining the nature of Christian covenant primarily out of the Jewish canon. This definition came especially from promises made by God through those scriptures, because of the limited and fragmentary availability of the New Testament during the first century after the resurrection.¹⁶ The use of the Hebrew scriptures led to a natural challenge from the Jewish community, which intensified the existential conflict between Christians and Jews.¹⁷

The reality of this challenge led to the rise of the earliest Christian writers, the apologists. Within these apologists, scholars differ as to when and who made the first attempts at covenant theology. For Femi Adeyami, Justin Martyr first espoused a “New Covenant Torah,”¹⁸ representing the earliest attempt at self-definition through discussing the nature of the relationship between Jesus and covenant. Gräbe disagrees, finding the *Epistle of Barnabas* as the earliest expression of Christian self-definition through discussion of covenant. A word search for

¹³ Ibid., 184.

¹⁴ Kaiser, 14.

¹⁵ Gräbe, 172.

¹⁶ Femi Adeyemi, *The New Covenant Torah in Jeremiah and the Law of Christ in Paul* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 21.

¹⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 173.

¹⁸ Ibid.

“covenant” through the Ante-Nicene texts¹⁹ reveals Gräbe as correct. *Barnabas* appears to be the earliest extent, post-New Testament, writing to deal with the nature of the relationship between covenant and Jesus. In fact, that same search reveals that, within the corpus of non-canonical writings during the first century and a half after the resurrection (c. 50-200 CE), only four authors develop the idea of covenant as a means of self-defining Christianity: the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria. This, then, forms the basis for studying the move from exclusivism to inclusivism through these four authors.

How, then, does Jesus connect to the Hebrew understanding of covenant? A central way the New Testament relates Jesus to the idea of covenant is through the use of covenant language in the Last Supper. Earliest mention in extant Christian literature of this relationship comes from the Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 11:25 when Paul records Jesus as saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”²⁰ All three synoptic Gospels include mention of the institution of the Last Supper as a part of the passion narrative.²¹ Each mentions the cup Jesus takes and declares to be his blood as related to covenant. For Matthew and Mark, the cup represents the “blood of the covenant” (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24, NRSV), leaving undefined which covenant, or what is meant exactly by covenant. Luke, however, asserts that the cup represents a “new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20), using of the word “new” to specify what kind of covenant Luke means. Assuming Markan priority, it appears that the author of Luke added this word “new” to Mark’s

¹⁹ Philip Schaff, ed. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vols. 1 & 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2009), n.p.

²⁰ William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1975), 103.

²¹ Burton H. Throckmorton ed., *Gospel Parallels: A Comparison of the Synoptic Gospels* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992), 184-185.

presentation of the Last Supper,²² or perhaps knew of it from the same tradition as Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians.²³ The difference between the the Matthean/Markan and the Lukan/Pauline accounts raises a question of the particulars of covenant to which the authors sought to help their readers relate. Considering both the Lukan account as adding the word "new" to the Markan account and Paul's separate use of the phrase provides a place to begin to address this question of relationship between Jesus and covenant because it asserts a particular perspective; namely, that this covenant is substantially different enough to be considered new.

What, then, might be new about this covenant? A concordance search of "new covenant" within both testaments reveals a connection between this text and a specific Old Testament scripture; that of Jeremiah 31:31-34.²⁴ The mention of a "new covenant" in the Old Testament occurs only in this particular scripture, including in the Septuagint translation, suggesting that, perhaps, Luke and Paul sought to point their readers toward this particular Jeremiah scripture. While there is some scholarly debate around whether or not this is the case in 1 Corinthians, there is evidence for a relationship between other mentions of new covenant in New Testament writings and the Jeremiah 31 scripture. R. Alan Culpepper, in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, specifies that "new covenant" in Luke refers to the new covenant in Jeremiah, noting that the author of Hebrews also makes such a connection between Jeremiah 31 and Jesus (Hebrews 8:6-13; 9:13-14; 9:18-20).²⁵ Patrick Miller in his commentary on Jeremiah, concurs in

²² Clare K. Rothschild, "Historical Criticism," in *Methods for Luke*, Joel B. Green, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 17.

²³ R. Alan Culpepper, "Luke 22:14-20, The Last Supper," in *Luke; John*, vol. IX of *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 420.

²⁴ John R. Kohlenberger, ed., "Covenant," in *The NRSV Concordance Unabridged* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 277-278.

²⁵ Culpepper, 420.

The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, stating the connection between citations of a “new covenant” in Luke and 1 Corinthians with the particular Jeremiah 31 scripture.²⁶ Indeed, even Old Testament scholars acknowledge that the idea of new covenant in the New Testament generally and Hebrews specifically relates to Jeremiah.²⁷

In fact, for early Christian writers, the Jeremiah understanding of new covenant formed the “locus classicus”²⁸ for understanding and defining the nature of the relationship between Jesus and covenant.²⁹ Kaiser notes three reasons for its function as a “locus classicus.” First, it functions as a starting point for discussion of covenant theology in part because Jeremiah is the only place in the Septuagint where the word new precedes the word covenant. Second, this Jeremiah pericope is the subject of nine passages in the New Testament and the longest quoted passage of the Septuagint within the New Testament,³⁰ making it highly likely that early patristic writers, having only fragments of what would become the New Testament, would have run into this phrasing among whatever writings they had. Third and finally, Kaiser notes the connection to the last supper in 1 Corinthians and Luke. For these reasons, Jeremiah 31:31-34 took primary importance for patristic writers when seeking to understand the nature of the covenant relationship to Jesus.

²⁶ Patrick Miller, “Jeremiah 30:1-31:40 Reflections, #9,” in *Introduction to Prophetic Literature, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel*, vol. VI of *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 815.

²⁷ Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 366.

²⁸ Kaiser, 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ cf. Hebrews 8:8-12, NRSV.

The Epistle of Barnabas

Of the four authors examined here, *The Epistle of Barnabas* comes chronologically first, offering a highly spiritualized view of the Christ covenant. The anonymous author wrote this epistle between 97 or 135 CE.³¹ Scholars tend to think the author wrote from Alexandria, one of the principle centers of thought for Christianity at the time. Among all the early church fathers, scholars also think *Barnabas's* spiritualization of Old Testament texts is unique.

Barnabas's spiritualization demonstrates a highly exclusivist view, derived from an understanding that the Jews had lost the original covenant at the incident with the Golden Calf in Exodus 32. (*Barnabas*, 5) God is instead, though Jesus, choosing a new people, so much so that it prohibits Jews, even converted ones, from entering into relationship with God. This radical interpretation comes from *Barnabas's* understanding that God had rejected the Jews totally after successive attempts through the prophets to reconcile the people back to God. In fact, the author of *Barnabas* states that the new covenant through Christ brings “to a head the sum of their sins who had persecuted His [God's] prophets.” (5) God's final attempt at offering relationship and salvation through covenant came through Jesus, but in rejecting Jesus just as they had rejected the law at the Golden Calf incident, the Jews have irreconcilably rejected God. The author stands his argument on the fulfillment of prophecies, primarily from Isaiah, that the Jews would reject this newest offering of covenant. Thus, the author can remark that salvation through Jesus “tends to the Jews' destruction.” (5)

In this way, the author of *Barnabas* states that only one covenant exists. Christians are inheritors of the original covenant of land because Jesus redefined the land by placing the heart

³¹ Everett Ferguson, *Church History: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context*, vol. 1: From Christ to Pre-Reformation (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 51-52.

of the land (temple) into human hearts, thereby nourishing his followers with spiritual milk and honey. (6) The new covenant, according to *Barnabas*, was prefigured in the old covenant, given a glimpse that one can only see now through Christ and all the ways in which the prophets foretold his coming. *Barnabas* goes so far as to suggest that this was how the covenant should have been understood for all times, but humanity did not have adequate understanding and foresight until Jesus came to demonstrate it. Because there is only one covenant, meant all along for those who would accept Jesus, the covenant is not new. Perhaps this is the reason that Jeremiah 31, the “locus classicus,” is completely absent from his writings, the only one of the four authors examined here to not mention it.

Barnabas goes to these extremes to demonstrate Christians as the people of God, chosen by God, just like God had chosen the Jews who rejected God time and time again. Such a reality means that God relates exclusively through followers of Jesus, for in the Jews rejecting God, God has chosen to reject the Jews and offer the covenant to a new people. (5) Gräbe notes that *Barnabas*, along with Justin Martyr, demonstrates the “high water mark”³² of covenantal theology in the ancient church as these early fathers sought to connect Christology with covenant.³³ Gräbe seems to suggest such a “high water mark” as the epitome of an exclusivist position, one that demonstrates Christ as not only the fulfillment of covenantal promises God made with humanity, but as the only means by which humanity can gain access to relationship with God, with the notable exception, for *Barnabas*, of the Jews.

³² Gräbe, 172.

³³ *Ibid.*

Justin Martyr

A highly influential and important second-century Christian author, Justin Martyr, author of *Dialogue with Trypho*, was born a Gentile in Samaria in Neapolis. He took to the philosophical schools, seeking to understand the world, but found them all unsatisfactory until he discovered Christianity. In this discovery, Justin believed he had found the perfect form of philosophy, one he considered superior to all others.³⁴ To prove Christianity's superiority, Justin composed his famous *Dialogue with Trypho*, using a conversation with the Jewish philosopher Trypho to go through an orderly debate of the principles of Judaism and Christian claims about them.

Within this *Dialogue*, Justin states that Christians are the inheritors of an adjusted covenant, a somewhat different take from *Barnabas's* claim that God had meant the covenant for the followers of Jesus all along and chosen to exclude the Jews after the Golden Calf. This inheritance comes from the same God who first covenanted with the Jews and remains the same covenant, although the terms and conditions of the covenant have changed drastically. Such a reality is not, at first, apparent. In Chapter 11 of the *Dialogue*, Justin states the covenant as new since its inception with Moses, citing the Jeremiah 31 scripture to do so. (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 11) He states, "If, therefore, God proclaimed a new covenant which was to be instituted, and this for a light for the nations, we see and are persuaded that men approach God, leaving their idols and other unrighteousness, through the name of Him who was crucified, Jesus Christ, and abide by their confession even unto death, and maintain piety." (11) The law, according to Justin, has gone, superseded by this covenant created by Jesus, which cannot itself

³⁴ Johnson, 199.

be superseded. This, taken by itself, seems to suggest both that there are two covenants, one of which would be new. As he continues his argument, however, he reveals an understanding, like Barnabas, of only one covenant, with Christians as the inheritors of that original covenant with the Jews. Justin states: “the true spiritual Israel, and descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham...are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ...” (11)

Adjusting the terms and conditions of the original covenant allows Justin Martyr to assert that Christians are the new chosen people of God; the new Israel. (11) Justin uses the Jeremiah 31 scripture to highlight his understanding of an old covenant with new terms and conditions. In declaring Christians as the new Israel, he directly links them to Jeremiah’s proclamation that the new covenant will be with “the house of Israel.”³⁵ The covenant will not come through the law, as Jeremiah makes clear, for it will not be as it was “for their fathers in the day when I took them by their hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, because they did not abide in my covenant and I was unconcerned for them, quoth the Lord.”³⁶ The fact that the Jews had lost the covenant, according to Justin and in agreement with *Barnabas*, becomes clear later in the *Dialogues*. In chapter 122, Justin points out to Trypho that, “[y]ou [Jews] do not tremble at God’s threats, for you are a people foolish and hard-hearted. ‘Therefore, behold, I will proceed to remove this people’ saith the Lord: ‘and I will remove them, and destroy the wisdom of the wise, and hide the understanding of the prudent.’” (122) He then goes on to further explain the point to Trypho that they, Christians, are now Israel, for “if the law were able to enlighten the nations and those who possess it, what need is there of a new covenant?” (122) “As, therefore, from the one man Jacob,

³⁵ Jeremiah 38(31):31, in *A New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS)*, Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³⁶ Jeremiah 38(31):32, *NETS*.

who was surnamed Israel, all your nation has been called Jacob and Israel; so we from Christ, who begat us unto God...are called and are the true sons of God, and keep the commandments of Christ.” (123)

Justin demonstrates agreement with *Barnabas* that the covenant is old and there remains only one covenant. He makes this point clear in previously cited passages, but perhaps most explicitly in chapter 34, where he states that one should understand the covenant as a new formulation (as opposed to a new covenant outright) because the Jewish understanding that “the law of the Lord is perfect”³⁷ refers to the Mosaic law as well as the new law in Christ, for God said (ostensibly through Jeremiah, although not explicitly referenced) that God would make a new covenant. (34) Such an understanding stands against some scholarship, which contends that Justin suggested two covenants.³⁸ This, however, simply cannot be true because Justin seeks throughout his argument to prove that Christians are the new Israel, inheritors of God’s contracting nature with humanity.

Justin diverges from *Barnabas*, however, in two critical components: understanding of the covenant and soteriology. First, he understands the covenant’s terms and conditions to have changed under Jesus, a method of interpretation that stands against *Barnabas*’s spiritualization of the original covenant. Second, he offers a broader soteriology by allowing room for Jews to come into the new covenant, even though they must first be converted. (11) For *Barnabas*, the Jews, in rejecting the covenant, had damned themselves for all time.

³⁷ Ps. 18(19):7, *NETS*.

³⁸ Gräbe, 182-3

In this way, Justin demonstrates how he understands God to relate to humanity: still exclusively, but with some room for Jews to come back to the covenant if they will understand Jesus as the channel through which God has rearticulated the covenant. Justin goes to these pains in search of defining Christianity as the most supreme philosophy, distinct from Judaism and, at least as far as covenant is concerned, the replacement for Judaism. In fact, Justin is the first to give coherent expression, according to Adeyami, to what it means for Christians to be under a “New Covenant Torah.”³⁹ Adeyami emphasizes that Justin interprets Jeremiah 31 as referring to the new covenant being open to Gentiles because of Christ, using the *Dialogue with Trypho* to demonstrate that Christians believe in the God of the Old Testament but understanding covenant through Jesus’s life and teachings, which constitute a new law.⁴⁰ Jews here can understand what Christ has done for the truth is not completely closed off, as it is for *Barnabas*, representing a small, but consequential move toward inclusion. What remains true throughout is the reality that Jesus has established a covenant for all people, a marked change from *Barnabas*’s radical exclusion of the Jews from the new covenant under Jesus.

Irenaeus

Irenaeus wrote from Lyons, living from c. 115-202.⁴¹ He wrote his works primarily as a reaction against Marcionism and Gnosticism, two prevailing alternative Christian theologies later deemed heretical which inspired his book *Against Heresies*.⁴² This work, as well as later

³⁹ Adeyami, 21

⁴⁰ Adeyami, 21-22

⁴¹ Ferguson, 124-125

⁴² Ronald E. Heine, *Reading the Old Testament with the Ancient Church: Exploring the Formation of Early Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 64.

fragments of a systematic theology, both examined here, became the defining source for knowledge about Gnosticism during these early years of Christian formation.⁴³

While Justin continued to demonstrate an exclusivist position, albeit with a slight move toward inclusion, Irenaeus makes the move toward inclusivism much more apparent. He, like Justin, uses the “locus classicus,” Jeremiah 31, but to very different conclusions. Irenaeus’s new covenant understanding demonstrates a willingness to consider that the old covenant retains some efficacy for helping Jews find their way into covenantal relationship with God, a relationship understood as still having to come through Christ alone.

According to Ronald E. Heine, Irenaeus states that the covenants for Jews and for Christians do differ, which offers a shift in thought from *Barnabas* and Justin.⁴⁴ These differences come not from God, however, but from humanity. For Irenaeus, those who are slaves to sin need the law, and those who have been justified through faith in Jesus Christ are set free from the law. According to Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*, the covenant with Jews temporary; it had a predetermined end. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.4) That predetermined end came “with John [the Baptist]” (*Against Heresies*, 4.4) as a necessary consequence for Christ to fulfill the new covenant which Christ established. Such came, at least in part, because the Jews had been given many opportunities to change their hearts, but they had refused. (*Against Heresies*, 4.17)

Within these same references, Irenaeus also finds rationale for why the covenant, established through Moses, was only temporary. The law, in its requirements of burnt-offerings, sacrifices, and rote adherence, demonstrates that the covenant could only be temporary; a means

⁴³ Johnson, 217.

⁴⁴ Heine, 64.

of instructing in obedience. It is here that Jeremiah 31 becomes “locus classicus” for Irenaeus’s understanding of covenant. (*Against Heresies*, 4.9) In the future, a future that has become reality in Jesus Christ, the new covenant will still require obedience, but will come through the law written on the hearts of the people. The fact that the new covenant is marked by spirit means that humanity’s offering to God is now the life of the individual and community, something humanity could not do within the law. (Irenaeus, *Fragments from the Lost Writings of Irenaeus*, 37) The reality of this Spirit enabling a sacrifice of self is what Jesus did in his sacrifice and what is made manifest in the eucharist. Jesus, then, has replaced the temporary covenant through Moses at Mount Sinai with a now permanent covenant, one marked by the Spirit and the law on the hearts of those who will turn to Christ. (*Against Heresies*, 4.4)

For Irenaeus, the temporary covenant created further questions relevant to self-definition in the community. If the God who created the initial covenant made it temporary, later bringing the permanent covenant to bear through God’s only Son, Jesus Christ, why not bring the permanent covenant first, skipping the temporary one? Such an argument also raises questions about the divinity of Jesus Christ, for if he was sent into the world to establish a new covenant, did he exist from before time, co-existing with God in the Trinity? Irenaeus provides answers to both questions through his understanding of the role of Christ in both covenants. If one will stop rejecting Christ, he argues, one can see exactly how the new covenant is for a new time for more people and one will also see how both covenants are from the same God.

To the first question, Irenaeus states that the covenants were given for a specific time and people. (*Against Heresies*, 3.12) The old law was fitting for those who need the extra guidance, while the new law is fitting for those who are free and justified, which is what Christ did. Thus,

the Jews needed the extra guidance, while this new people, presumably the Gentiles, are no longer in need of such guidance, but are, instead, ready for liberty, which distinguishes the new covenant. (*Against Heresies*, 4.33)

To the second question, Irenaeus argues that it was Jesus who “spake with Abraham and Moses, and who has restored us anew to liberty, and has multiplied that grace which is from Himself.” (*Against Heresies*, 4.9) Because God is one, and Jesus is a part of that oneness as the second member of the Trinity, Irenaeus finds rationale for understanding Jesus as the revealer and creator, the same “householder,” of both covenants. (*Against Heresies*, 4.9) Irenaeus says that Jesus, as the Word who was from the beginning, has created both, but through separate actions (Abraham and Jesus’s crucifixion), for separate reasons (obedience to the law versus writing the law on the hearts of believers), and with separate results (temporal versus permanent). There is unity among the covenants in the God who covenants, especially seen in Irenaeus’s understanding of the covenant always coming through Jesus. The new, permanent, covenant through Jesus, however, remains distinct and separate from the first.

Irenaeus embarks down a markedly different path than his contemporaries; a path he found through understanding the covenants as operating under the same system. The modern scholar Ronald Heine posits an economic understanding of covenant. He finds Irenaeus arguing that the covenants operate according to the same economy, which he defines as the need to overcome the separation between God and humanity.⁴⁵ As Irenaeus noted, this economy came first, and temporarily, through the law that the Jews might be guided into right relationship. As Jews increasingly rejected God’s overtures to right relationship, however, (*Against Heresies*,

⁴⁵ Heine, 64.

4.17) God found the timing right to send Jesus into the world, expanding the population to whom provision to overcome this separation was offered. (*Against Heresies*, 3.12) These prophecies point to a change in reality, a change in the essential nature of how God provides the means to overcome this separation. (*Against Heresies*, 4.34) Such a change is best expressed by Jeremiah 31, pointing most decisively to the fact that the nature of how God overcomes this separation, in other words, how God covenants, would change. (*Against Heresies*, 4.9)

All this does not suggest, however, that Irenaeus maintains an exclusivist view in terms of the covenant as established by Jesus. Being a covenant of liberty, marked by a new ability to simply give oneself over to Christ in obedience, Irenaeus certainly asserts this new covenant as a better way than the previous, but he does not, at the same time, fully discount the Mosaic law. Irenaeus notes the benefit of the law in helping continue to point Jews to the right God, even if they worshipped in the wrong way. (*Against Heresies*, 3.12) In fact, their continued worship was not stubbornness or willful disobedience, as Justin or *Barnabas* might suggest, but was instead simply a result of blindness. (*Against Heresies*, 4.4) The covenant was temporary, and they had not yet realized its end. Following the law could prove a means by which to eliminate that which blinded and lead them into the light of Christ.

In fact, Irenaeus arguing the first covenant as temporary in nature demonstrates a much more generous perspective on the part of Irenaeus to Jews. *Barnabas* blamed the Jews and said that, in their rejection of Christ, they had damned themselves. Justin is a bit less harsh, but sees absolutely no benefit for the Jews in continuing in their ways. For Irenaeus, the law of Moses and the covenant through Abraham not only are not condemning, but they provide some efficacy in imputing righteousness. (*Against Heresies*, 5.32) The law itself is incapable of providing

covenant relationship to God, but as a part of the covenant established through Abraham, which he notes as retaining some efficacy in imputing righteousness, following this original covenant can help lead people to open their eyes to the new reality of the covenant as established by Jesus. (*Against Heresies*, 3.12) In fact, Irenaeus even understands the the law and original covenant as retaining some efficacy for the earliest Christians. He notes that the early apostle's initial adherence to the law helped them understand what God had done through Christ.

In this way, Irenaeus suggests a much less exclusionary understanding of covenant. God continues to speak through the old covenant, temporary as it was for building relationship, and helps point toward the only way to true relationship, Jesus Christ. Irenaeus expands upon Justin's initial move toward inclusivism, further establishing the point that Jesus has opened the door for all of humanity to find their way to covenantal relationship with God.

Clement of Alexandria

Clement, born in Alexandria, was not a Christian early in his life.⁴⁶ He, instead, represents an educated and cultured convert who sought, like Justin Martyr, to present Christianity philosophically. In his philosophical discussion, Clement discusses the idea of covenant much as Irenaeus does, presenting the covenant as something different that God has done through Christ, and thus something new and separate. (Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, 6.7) Thus, like Irenaeus, the covenant comes from the same God but is understood in a new way. His approach is highly philosophical. Clement notes that the Law is "the shadow of the truth," (*The Stromata*, 6.7) while Christ is wisdom itself. Whatever wisdom

⁴⁶ Ferguson, 124.

was known was a revelation of Christ into the world through either philosophy or law; thus, when Christ came in full, the revelation was understood in full, thus full wisdom entered the world. This means that philosophy must be of God, for scripture confirms that all understanding comes from God. Clement thus demonstrates an understanding that all wisdom comes from God, is revealed through Christ into the world, and has been revealed in the past in part, but now, through the life of Jesus on earth, can be understood fully.

What makes Clement remarkable, however, and distinctive from others previously examined, is his turn toward other means of knowing God, other philosophies. One might reasonably conclude from such remarks an agreement with Irenaeus regarding Jewish law, which proves true. Clement understands the law as a partial revelation, a “shadow of the truth.” (*The Stromata*, 6.7) He notes that the covenant made through Jesus is a new and third way to God. (*The Stromata*, 6.8) The first way was the law, but in a fascinating move, he states that the God who gave the covenant through Moses and the covenant through Jesus is also the giver of Greek philosophy. He goes so far as to state that Greek philosophy gives God glory among the Greeks, not only in the past, but also in the present. Philosophy, as revealed by the Greeks, is every bit as equal a method for coming to understand God as Mosaic law. In fact, for Clement, both continue to reveal God into the world, for the self-revelation of God does not cease, even if it has found its greatest expression in Jesus Christ.

Christianity marks this greatest expression of God’s self-revelation because Clement understands it as a merging of the two partial revelations of God; namely, Judaism and Greek philosophy, into one great philosophy, a “race of the saved people...who accept faith.” (*The Stromata*, 6.8) In fact, in *Stromateis* Book 6, chapter 5, Clement uses Jeremiah 31 to discuss this

very point. (*Stromateis*, 6.5) He notes that “what belonged to the Greeks and Jews is old,” (*Stromateis*, 6.5) for Christians now have a new, third way, that is more spiritual. To the Gentiles, God made Godself known through philosophy, to the Jews, through the law, and now to all people equally through Christ. In fact, Christ is the fulfillment of Jeremiah 31, for in being exalted through the resurrection and the ascension, Christ has inscribed the new law as Jeremiah describes: a new law allows all to know God equally, a law that will be inscribed on the hearts of people, and a law that will not remember sins. (*Exhortation to the Greeks*, 2).

Clement concludes that all should all become "acquainted with [God], that we might receive mercy and grace."⁴⁷ Based on his earlier understanding of God's previous and continued self-revelation through both Greek philosophy and Jewish law, by acquainted with God, Clement could be understood as meaning any of these three options. The scholar Everett Ferguson notes this in his remarks on Clement.⁴⁸ The Logos, Christ, as Clement understood, revealed the Jewish law, just as Irenaeus remarked. The Greeks, during their initial philosophical development, received the basis of their philosophy from this Jewish law. As they worked on their philosophy, angels from God guided the process, ensuring that they continued to reveal God through their work. Thus, both received divine inspiration through Christ as well. Because of the presence of God's inspiration in what they worked on, whether borrowed from scriptures or from angels, Christians could make as much use of philosophy as they wanted to. Such a reality is what has allowed Christianity to bring back together, through Christ, in a powerful way, what was previously from the same root: Jewish law and Greek philosophy.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ferguson, 131.

It is thus that Clement can propose Christianity as the best philosophy, the best way to go about coming to know God into one “race of the saved people...who accept faith.” (*Stromata*, 6.5) In this way, Clement brings inclusivism to its greatest expression, representing a stark move from *Barnabas*. In suggesting that God has revealed Godself, and continues to do so, through many means including Greek philosophy and Jewish law, God has demonstrated a willingness to be revealed in several ways and not exclusively through Jesus, as *Barnabas* and Justin would argue. For Clement, the options for following God are not between right and wrong ways, as *Barnabas* would suggest, or even as Justin Martyr might suggest, but an option between better and best. In fact, in Chapter VIII of *The Stromata*, Clement argues that there are even more ways that God has revealed Godself. (*Stromata*, 6.8) He remarks that “[t]he absence of respect of persons in God is not then in time, but from eternity. Nor had His beneficence a beginning nor any more is it limited to places or persons.” (*Stromata*, 6.8) By God being unlimited to places or persons, Clement goes on to explain that ““The Lord is on many waters,”⁴⁹ not the different covenants alone, but the modes of teaching, those among the Greeks and those among the Barbarians, conducing to righteousness.” (*Stromata*, 6.8) Clement sees God as having revealed Godself even to the Barbarians, those who were outside the cultural boundaries of Rome. For Clement, then, providing a definition of Christianity as its own religion does not at all seem to hinge on excluding Jews or any who deny Christ, as might be expected. Clement instead shows a remarkable generosity of spirit and understanding that Jesus has established a means for all of humanity to find relationship with God and, thereby, find their way into covenantal relationship.

⁴⁹ Ps. 29:3, as translated by Clement.

Ancient Sources Summary

Barnabas, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Clement of Alexandria thus demonstrate a shift from an exclusivist point of view to an inclusivist point of view. Their use of covenant theology, primarily through Jeremiah 31:31-34, the previously noted “locus classicus” for patristics, helped to define a Christian conception of covenant. This conception resulted in fierce debates and problematic perspectives, as examined above, but created agreement that Jesus established opportunity for covenantal relationship beyond the Jews, a covenant they generally agree is marked by a God who makes promises out of God’s love for God’s creation and seeks to keep those promises. This agreement fostered a unique identity for Christians that would maintain the faith’s Jewish roots while also appealing to newly converted Gentiles, addressing underlying existential anxiety.⁵⁰

For all four ancient authors, the unique Christian identity found rooting in the covenant as established by Jesus but also showed an increasing willingness to understand God as relating to humanity outside of Jesus, outside of Christianity, and even outside of Judaism. Their interpretations, and the fostering of the idea that Jesus established the means for covenant relationship for all of humanity, have remained a part of modern Christian interpretations; a reality that means their perspectives also continue to offer supersessionist interpretations of Jeremiah 31 and new covenant.

⁵⁰ Gräbe, 182.

Modern Perspectives on Jeremiah 31 and New Covenant

The ancients reveal a wrestling with the relevancy of the Jeremiah 31 pericope and the nature of the new covenant established by Jesus, one that moved from an exclusivist view to an inclusive one, all the while continuing supersessionist interpretation. If the ancients could offer such a generous perspective, and yet not leave supersessionism behind, can a Christian community interpret the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 without committing supersessionism? Put another way, can the interpretation of this scripture hold relevance for both a Jewish and a Christian community?

Based on the writings of Clement, it is reasonable to expect an increasing move away from supersessionism. While *Barnabas* suggests the text never held relevance, nor even authority, for Jewish audiences, Clement's writings reveal a willingness to accept that the text could hold relevance for both, even while maintaining Jesus as the best revelation of God into the world. Certainly, the ancients show a trend this inclusive direction.

The modern church, then, presents an unexpected shift away from Clement and away from the trajectory of the ancients, instead moving toward supersessionism. In both commentaries and sermons from a variety of mainline pastors, supersessionism continues to be the dominant choice for modern Christians when interpreting Jeremiah 31 and the new covenant.

Reformed and Wesleyan Perspectives

The founders of two main branches of Protestant Christianity, John Calvin and John Wesley, show this continuing supersessionism through a differentiation of law and grace. John Calvin, the founder of Reformed theology, in his *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet*

Jeremiah and The Lamentations, actually begins without supersessionist thought, stating that the covenant with the Jews remains.⁵¹ Calvin notes:

[n]ow, as to the *new* covenant, it is not so called, because it is contrary to the first covenant; for God is never inconsistent with himself, nor is he unlike himself. He then who once made a covenant with his chosen people, had not changed his purpose, as though he had forgotten his faithfulness. It then follows, that the first covenant was inviolable; besides, he had already made his covenant with Abraham and the Law was confirmation of that covenant.⁵²

Calvin introduces a concept that some of the ancients noted: God covenants and does not break promises. Jeremiah's covenant, however, is different in "form," which demonstrates that it is, in fact, about Jesus.⁵³ Calvin notes, "[L]et us now see why he promises to the people a *new* covenant. it being new, no doubt refers to what they call the form; and the form, or manner, regards not words only, but first Christ, then the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the whole external way of teaching."⁵⁴ With this comment, Calvin introduces the idea of a difference between law and grace. For the Jews, the covenant still holds power in that the law remains their rule for relationship with God. Through Jesus, according to Calvin, God has provided a new way to covenant, one based on grace, that does not require rote adherence to a set of laws. In other words, Calvin articulates, in a somewhat novel way, what Justin Martyr noted; namely, that

⁵¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and The Lamentations*, Vol. Fourth, Rev. John Owen, trans. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), 126.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

God's covenantal action is the same, but the nature of how God goes about covenant is different, and that difference is manifest in Christ.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and Wesleyan theology, continues this thought about the difference between law and grace. In his "Notes on the Book of Jeremiah," Wesley states:

[t]he prophet's design here is to express the difference betwixt the law and the gospel.

The first shows duty, the latter brings the grace of regeneration, by which the heart is changed, and enabled for duty. All under the time of the law that came to salvation, were saved by this new covenant; but this was not evidently exhibited; neither was the regenerating grace of God so common under the time of the law, as it hath been under the gospel.⁵⁵

Here, Wesley continues the thought that the new covenant establishes a rule of grace, rather than a rule of law, and that Jesus Christ established this new rule, a view that maintains a more exclusivistic view, like the ancients *Barnabas* and Justin Martyr.

Current Scholarship and Homiletical Perspectives

Such thoughts between law and grace have continued into contemporary commentaries.

In the *Revised Common Lectionary*, Jeremiah 31:31-34 rotates in during the fifth Sunday of Lent in Year B.⁵⁶ The *Feasting on the Word* commentary series, based on the *Revised Common*

⁵⁵ John Wesley, "Notes on the Book of Jeremiah," *Wesley's Explanatory Notes* (Niagara Falls, NY: Wesleyan Heritage Publishing, 2015), Online, accessed February 10, 2015 and available at: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/john-wesleys-notes-on-the-bible/notes-on-the-book-of-jeremiah/>.

⁵⁶ "Reverse Lectionary," *The Lectionary Page*, online, accessed January 20, 2015 and available at <http://www.lectionarypage.net/ReverseLectionary.html#Jeremiah>.

Lectionary, offers four different perspectives on this text: theological, pastoral, exegetical, and homiletical.⁵⁷ In the Theological Perspective, Samuel Roberts continues the law and grace dichotomy, stating that the law was written on the hearts confirms Jesus’s call for inward change, which shows God’s assurance of salvation that would be fulfilled in Jesus.⁵⁸ The old covenant, established through Abraham and Moses, proved flawed, for “humanity simply does not have the capacity to heal itself,”⁵⁹ which is how Roberts understands the role of the law. Thus, the new covenant Jeremiah announces demonstrates God’s love for humanity because it shows that God would choose to change the nature of the covenant, realizing that humans lacked the capacity to keep up with the demands of the law.⁶⁰ Such a perspective demonstrates a fascinating track backwards from the perspective of Clement, and even of Irenaeus, by implying that, first, God made a mistake in the means of the first covenant and, second, that the new covenant has made null the first covenant because humanity could not keep up with the demands.

The Pastoral Perspective, written by Richard Floyd, continues this argument that the new covenant has made the old covenant null and void, based on humanity’s inability to keep up with the law.⁶¹ Jeremiah, through the new covenant, announces that God will act afresh and anew,

⁵⁷ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., “Jeremiah 31:31-34,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 122.

⁵⁸ Samuel K. Roberts, “Theological Perspective on Jeremiah 31:31-34,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 122.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁶¹ Richard Floyd, “Pastoral Perspective on Jeremiah 31:31-34,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 124, 126.

undoing the wrongs of the people by offering a new and better way to do covenant. This creates hope, a hope for the future when God will do such a thing, a hope made reality through Christ.

The homiletical perspective, written by Woody Bartlett, takes little time to deal with the Jewish roots of this particular pericope, moving quickly to simply state that, “[t]hough we might treat it narrowly, this is not just a text for those in the church. It is a promise for all and a harbinger of the freedom promised by Jesus through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.”⁶² For Bartlett, the Jeremiah pericope holds relevance only if understood through the lens of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Thus, in three of four perspectives, even the much venerated *Feasting on the Word* continues the supersessionist thought. It might seem natural to make such a move during the Lenten season, focused as it is on the inevitable march of Jesus toward crucifixion and resurrection, but it also stands as a stark reminder of how easily supersessionism sneaks into otherwise good scholarship through this Jeremiah pericope.

The fourth, exegetical, perspective, while not explicitly engaging in supersessionism, and while acknowledging the difficulty in interpreting this scripture as relevant for Christians, sidesteps the issue entirely by suggesting that the text points to an eschatological reality. Jon Berquist notes, “[t]he highly utopian tone of the prophecy points more clearly to a vision that is not yet over but is still in the process of realization. The internalization of God’s instructions may progress, even if we have not yet reached a day when teaching is irrelevant. The days when sins are forgotten is a day for which all should wait and work. These days are coming, says the

⁶² Woody Bartlett, “Homiletical Perspective on Jeremiah 31:31-34,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 125.

Lord.”⁶³ For Berquist, these days have not yet come. His interpretation may point to an eschatological reality in line with Christian theology, but it fails to address how, or even if, the pericope relates to covenant.

Patrick Miller, in his commentary on Jeremiah in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, notes a similar point: the pericope focuses on an eschatological reality, rather than a here and now reality, one which reveals the nature of the God whom they serve.⁶⁴ Rather than remaining angry forever, or holding their sins against the people for all time, his eschatological interpretation says that God will forgive those sins and institute a new way to go about covenantal relationship. In sidestepping, both perspectives may avoid supersessionism, but they continue the trend of not directly addressing the points of contention this scripture raises by not examining how Jesus does or does not relate to the new covenant.

While these perspectives sidestep, R.E. Clements, in the *Interpretation* commentary series, completely avoids discussing Christian interpretation at all, except to note that later Christians came to claim it as a text specifically about them.⁶⁵

A new law is not properly envisaged at all, but only a new way of Israel's knowing and keeping the existing law of the covenant made on Sinai. What is promised is not so much a radically different covenant but a renewed form of the earlier, broken, covenant. Only later, in the thinking of the Jewish community at Qumran and among the early Christian

⁶³ Jon L. Berquist, “Exegetical Perspective on Jeremiah 31:31-34,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 127.

⁶⁴ Miller, “31:31-34,” 812.

⁶⁵ R.E. Clements. “Jeremiah,” in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, James L. Mays and Patrick D. Miller, eds. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 191.

community (cf. Luke 22:20), did the idea begin to emerge that a wholly new covenant was intended by God.⁶⁶

This yields important historical background, but also avoids the points of contention around covenant and Jesus. Such an avoidance, like the two previously noted perspectives, promotes supersessionism by failing to offer an alternative understanding of new covenant or Jesus's relationship to the Jeremiah text.

The Anchor Bible Commentary takes this avoidance one step farther, simply gushing over the text itself.⁶⁷ Jeremiah 31:31-34, it notes, is:

deservedly famous. It describes the new covenant that God would one day give his people, forgiving their sins and writing his law on their hearts so that all of them know him....[this passage] represents what might well be considered the high point of his theology. It is certainly one of the profoundest and most moving passages in the entire Bible.⁶⁸

This interpretation leaves the reader wondering why and how it is profound and moving and if it holds any relevance for Christians at all; at least, beyond beauty.

Such perspectives, whether engaging in supersessionism, sidestepping into an eschatological reality, or avoiding Christian interpretation all together, retain the idea that the covenant will be new. This, by sheer logic, means that the old covenant has lost at least some efficacy or that the new covenant has some advantage over it. Regardless of the particulars, these perspectives suggest that the new covenant proves superior to the old in some way, for God has

⁶⁶ Ibid., 191.

⁶⁷ John Bright, "Jeremiah," *The Anchor Bible*, vol. 21 (New York: Doubleday, 1965), 287.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

done something new, with the underlying tone that God has done something better. Such perspectives continue supersessionism, whether they mean to or not, by invoking a change in covenants or by simply failing to engage the text completely.

A sampling of sermons from mainline denominations around the United States also demonstrate this continuing supersessionist thought about new covenant in the contemporary church. Whether influenced by the sampling of commentaries noted above or not, the supersessionist interpretation of Jeremiah 31 continues, unchallenged, through these contemporary sermons. In the sermons noted, preachers declared several different supersessionist interpretations: that Jeremiah notes a day when Christians will no longer need to live under the threat of the punishment of the law because Christ fulfilled the prophecy in Jeremiah 31;⁶⁹ that Christ nullified the law and established rule by grace;⁷⁰ that the law is now internal, because of Jesus, so Christians can more easily follow God's commands and demands on our lives;⁷¹ that Jesus, in establishing a new law, brought a reign of justice and compassion not present through the law;⁷² that Jeremiah foreshadows the salvation Christ offers for both Jew and Gentile;⁷³ that the new covenant will be established through love being written on human hearts, a love not

⁶⁹ Andrew Eckert, "A pious man sins in all his good works," (sermon, St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Wellston, OK, October 28, 2007), accessed January 22, 2015, <http://www.lcmssermons.com/index.php?sn=725>.

⁷⁰ Thomas Handrick, Sr. "God's New Covenant Is Full and Free Forgiveness," (sermon, Immanuel Lutheran Church & School, Perryville, MO, October 29, 2006), accessed January 22, 2015, <http://www.lcmssermons.com/index.php?sn=885>.

⁷¹ Lynn Campbell, "Lent V," (sermon, Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA, March 25, 2012), accessed January 22, 2015, <http://ccneedham.blogspot.com/2012/03/lent-v-lynn-campbell.html>.

⁷² Jeanne Finan, "My Soul Is Troubled," (sermon, Cathedral Church of St. Paul's, Burlington, VT, March 25, 2012), accessed January 22, 2015, <http://rememberyourbaptism.blogspot.com/2012/03/my-soul-is-troubledsermon-for-year-b.html>.

⁷³ Kevin Gasser, "Written on our hearts," (sermon, Staunton Mennonite Church, Staunton, Virginia, March 24, 2012), accessed January 22, 2015, <https://kgbuckeye.wordpress.com/2012/03/24/written-on-our-hearts/>.

present in the law;⁷⁴ that the new covenant establishes equality by no longer having a chosen people;⁷⁵ that the law written on human hearts is a permanent imprinting of Jesus by his death and resurrection;⁷⁶ and that Jesus is simply the fulfillment of the scripture.⁷⁷ This represents a sampling of the sermons reviewed through a sermon database maintained by Kent State University,⁷⁸ almost all of which demonstrate supersessionism and none of which offer an alternative understanding of Jeremiah 31 for Christians or the concept of new covenant.

Non-Supersessionist Interpretation of Jeremiah 31:31-34

Supersessionist thought, then, infiltrates interpretation of this particular pericope, seemingly without question, in both scholarly and homiletical sources, requiring an alternative, responsible, interpretation. A few sources offer clues for a new interpretation that allows the text to remain relevant to both Jewish and Christian audiences, without asserting that one perspective is superior to the other.

H.D. Potter, in his commentary on Jeremiah 31:31-34, gives a compelling interpretation of the text based on Davidic monarchical understanding. He notes that the monarchy had failed so spectacularly that Jeremiah, and the community who contributed to his book, believed that

⁷⁴ Charles Eric Fundston, "March Forth," (sermon, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Medina, OH, June 6, 2014), accessed January 22, 2015, <http://thefunstons.com/?p=7240>.

⁷⁵ Ibid., "As Water to Stone," (sermon, October 20, 2013), <http://thefunstons.com/?p=5894>.

⁷⁶ Jean Hansen, "On My Heart Imprint Your Image, Jesus," (sermon, Faith Lutheran Church, Akron, OH, April 6, 2003), accessed January 22, 2015, <http://www.faithlutheranchurch.org/faith/index.cfm/sermons/on-my-heart-imprint-your-image-jesus/>.

⁷⁷ Billy Hayes, "How's Your Heart?" (sermon, Hopewell Presbyterian Church, Florence, SC, October 25, 2010), accessed January 22, 2015, <https://revbill.wordpress.com/2010/10/25/jeremiah-3127-34/>.

⁷⁸ Kent State University, *Sermon Texts Posting Sites Index*, online database, accessed January 22, 2015, https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AhZGuWv1JoamdE4xLXlnSnVpOTVhUWFURFNxX3VVR1E&usp=drive_web#gid=0.

secular authorities could no longer be trusted to mediate and interpret the law.⁷⁹ Jeremiah instead offers a democratic principle, telling the people that God will give them the law directly, by writing it on their hearts. This text, then, points to a new self-revelation of God that will come in response to monarchical failure. Such a perspective could naturally lead to an interpretive move toward Jesus, but Potter's claim could also lead to an interpretation back toward the Shema and the nature of humanity as given in the image of God. The people, whom God commanded to "take to heart"⁸⁰ the law which God gave them, retain the capability of receiving that law themselves, for they are charged at the beginning of the Shema to "love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."⁸¹ Jeremiah 31 thus echoes the Shema, the call for all the people to know God.

This echoing of the Shema is the perspective offered by the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) Study Bible notes on Jeremiah 31:31-34.⁸² The notes state that this passage "refers to the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian exile and the reconstruction of the Temple. According to this passage, it is not the content of the new covenant which will be different, but how it will be learned."⁸³ This concurs with the findings of Potter, who noted this reality when discussing monarchical failure. Marvin Sweeney in the JPS notes goes further, stating that:

⁷⁹ H.D. Potter, "The New Covenant in Jeremiah XXXI 31-34," in *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 33, fasc. 3, published online by BRILL and JSTOR, accessed September 23, 2014 and available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1517549>, 355.

⁸⁰ Deuteronomy 6:6, JPS.

⁸¹ Deuteronomy 6:5, JPS.

⁸² Marvin A. Sweeney, "Note on Jeremiah 31:31 [33-34]," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), 991.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

God places the *Teaching*, i.e. the Torah, in the *inmost being* or heart of the people so that the covenant cannot be broken again. This idea is developed in later Lurianic kabbalah, which maintains that all persons have a divine spark within them. Since it is so inscribed, there will be no need for the Torah to be taught.⁸⁴

The idea of the imprint of God on the hearts of the people, a divine spark within that contains the Teaching (Torah) and inscribes it into the innermost being, provides the basis for a responsible interpretation of the Jeremiah 31 pericope that holds relevance to both Christians and Jews. The text, interpreted in this way, offers a specific and profound claim to its readers. It states that the imprint of God is already on the hearts of God's people. All they need to do for relationship with God is look inward to find the image of God already there.

Relationship with God, then, a relationship that finds its grounding in the Shema, begins by looking inward. This claim reinforces this covenant conception as not so much new, but as a reinforcement of the truth of God's imprint upon the hearts of God's people. Michael Coogan makes this link explicitly, noting that "the book of Jeremiah anticipates...the renewal of the Sinai covenant, written, as Deuteronomy urges, on the hearts of the restored Israel."⁸⁵ David Petersen concurs, referring to this covenant, understood in this way, as a reformulation and a reaffirmation of God's love for the people.⁸⁶ Walter Brueggemann notes further that the passage, in stating that God's imprint is in the innermost parts, demonstrates that God has moved from a "wounded love

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Michael Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 374.

⁸⁶ David L. Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 41.

and pathos” to a “sense of profound caring.”⁸⁷ The authors of *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* note this reality, too, stating that, “Torah requirements will no longer be imposed and extrinsic, evoking resistance, but now willingly embraced and enacted as Israel’s own true character and disposition.”⁸⁸ Jeremiah thus boldly and profoundly declares that all God’s people need to know to establish relationship with God is imprinted on their hearts and ready for discovery.

The link between Jesus and an internalized religion through the imprint of God on the hearts of the people comes easily, for Jesus speaks often of the heart in similar terms to Jeremiah. Jesus explicitly quotes the Shema as the first greatest commandment, stating, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”⁸⁹ The heart is where one’s treasure lies;⁹⁰ the gateway to understanding whether one has found God there or not;⁹¹ the seat of forgiveness because of God’s forgiveness of them;⁹² the deepest part of the soul, where God knows humanity intimately;⁹³ and a place of sensation that allows humanity to know God dwells there.⁹⁴ For Jesus, then, the heart reveals whether or not one has found God. This is not to suggest that God is not there, but retains what Jeremiah notes, that humanity has a choice

⁸⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 647.

⁸⁸ Birch, et. al., 366.

⁸⁹ Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27, NRSV.

⁹⁰ Matthew 6:21, NRSV.

⁹¹ Matthew 9:4, 12:34, 13:15, 15:8, 15:19, Mark 7:21, Luke 6:45, Luke 8:12, John 7:38, NRSV.

⁹² Matthew 18:35, NRSV.

⁹³ Luke 16:15, NRSV.

⁹⁴ Luke 24:32, NRSV.

of whether or not to engage with the imprint of God that lies there. The heart links Jeremiah's new covenant and Jesus, not in a supersessionist way, but in a mutually-reinforcing way.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 thus reveals the essential nature of covenant: that God is already there, within humanity; humans need only to look internally to see that reality. Such an interpretation holds relevance for both Christians and Jews alike. Both faith communities would add that sin clouds such a vision, which is what leads some to choose to reject or ignore the imprint of God that lies there, but the reality remains that relationship with God is an affair of the heart, a choice by humanity to engage relationship with God through choosing to seek and find the imprint of God that naturally lies there as a people who carry the image of God. While a link to Jesus is certainly possible, as explained above, it is by no means mandatory and such a link does not exclude or demean Jews in the process, thereby not committing supersessionism. It instead offers a Christian window through which to view this Jewish pericope. The sermon located in Appendix A explores this theme homiletically, carrying this exegesis into a sermon that seeks to maintain relevance for Christians.

Non-Supersessionist Interpretation of New Covenant

While Jesus speaks often of the heart, Jesus also declares, in Luke 22:20 that he has instituted a new covenant, stating “[t]his cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”⁹⁵ As previously noted, Luke's addition of the word “new” within this verse seeks to link the reader back to the Jeremiah 31 pericope, stating for his readers that Jesus's crucifixion, symbolized in the Last Supper, is the establishment of Jeremiah's new covenant. Such a

⁹⁵ Luke 22:20, NRSV.

perspective has held sway from Luke's time to modern times, as evidenced by ancient authors, modern commentaries, and contemporary sermons. Can contemporary readers, eager to not commit supersessionism, interpret the new covenant as established by Jesus with authority for Christians without demeaning the covenant for the Jews?

Determining how to interpret the new covenant without committing supersessionism begins by addressing the limited population included in Jeremiah's concept of covenant. Jeremiah declares that the new covenant, written on the hearts of the people, is for both the house of Israel and the house of Judah, limiting the scope of the covenant to the chosen people of God, descendants of Abraham, with whom God had originally covenanted.

In Luke, by contrast, Jesus notes that the new covenant established by his body and blood, is for "you,"⁹⁶ not the houses of Israel and Judah, per se. The greek word for "you" in Luke is plural, demonstrated by Martin Luther's translation of the word you into "euch," the German word whose close English equivalent is a possessive form of y'all.⁹⁷

Such a plural reference could mean simply the disciples or, more generally, all who would believe in Christ and seek relationship with God. Christians have certainly interpreted this plural you in terms of the latter. Matthew and Mark's accounts seem to agree with this interpretation, stating that such a pouring out of the blood is "for many, for the forgiveness of sins."⁹⁸ Scholarly interpretation of the Matthean text reinforces this latter understanding. In his commentary on Matthew's words of institution, Eugene Boring notes that Jesus's mention of the coming Kingdom of God, as well as his purposeful wording of the Last Supper that links it to the

⁹⁶ Luke 22:19, 20, NRSV.

⁹⁷ Lukas 22:19-20, Gute Nachricht Bibel, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft.

⁹⁸ Matthew 26:28 and Mark 14:24, NRSV.

Passover meal, denotes covenantal sacrifice.⁹⁹ Such covenantal sacrifice, as listed in the Old Testament, always refers to the officiant (here Jesus) acting on behalf of all of God's covenantal people, offering grace and salvation. PHEME PERKINS notes that Matthew's linking of "poured out for many" with "for the forgiveness of sins" denotes a new soteriological reality: that the blood Christ would spill to establish a new covenant that would be for all of humanity, not just for the house of Israel and the house of Judah.¹⁰⁰

Many Christian eucharistic liturgies announce this soteriological understanding by merging these Gospel accounts, stating that the blood is poured out for "you and for many for the forgiveness of sins,"¹⁰¹ or, in the case of the PCUSA, using plural pronouns such as "we" throughout the Great Thanksgiving, prior to the giving of the cup that notes it as given "for you."¹⁰² Such uses denote a Christian understanding that the cup of the new covenant is not simply for the house of Israel and the house of Judah, but "for many," for more than just the houses of Israel and Judah as declared in Jeremiah.

Traditional eucharistic liturgies, together with exegetical and scholarly evidence, point to Jesus's declaration in Luke of a new covenant as an expanded covenant as for all people, not just the houses of Israel and Judah. Remembering Luke's explicit linkage of this Last Supper scene to Jeremiah, Jesus's declaration specifically expands the Jeremiah covenantal understanding of a

⁹⁹ Eugene Boring, "Matthew 26:26-29, The Institution of the Eucharist," in *Matthew; Mark*, vol. VIII of *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 471-472.

¹⁰⁰ PHEME PERKINS, "Mark 14:22-25," in *Matthew; Mark*, vol. VIII of *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, vol. VIII (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 704.

¹⁰¹ The United Methodist Church, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 10, cf. The Episcopal Church, *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2007), 335; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, "The Liturgy of Holy Communion," published online, accessed March 12, 2015, <http://rmselca.org/synod/bishop/files/GoniaInstallation.pdf>.

¹⁰² Presbyterian Church (USA), "Liturgy for Presbytery Celebrations of the Lord's Supper," published online, accessed March 12, 2015, https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/sharedcelebration/pdfs/liturgy.pdf.

divine imprint on the hearts and in the inmost beings of all humanity. Jeremiah makes clear that all of humanity already has the imprint of God on their hearts, but, as previously noted, sin clouds the opportunity for humanity outside of the houses of Israel and Judah to see that imprint. The original covenant, specified as it was for the houses of Israel and Judah, seems to stipulate that only members of those houses could see through the fog of sin to find the divine spark. In expanding Jeremiah's understanding, Jesus has created opportunity, through his death and resurrection and epitomized by the Table, the ability for those who are outside of the houses of Israel and Judah to see through the fog of sin and find the imprint of God inscribed there on their hearts. The original covenant not only continues to maintain its efficacy for the original recipients, but now has efficacy into the rest of humanity.

Comparing these eucharistic texts to the Jeremiah 31 pericope demonstrates that expansion. If Jesus had simply come to bring to fruition the Jeremiah 31 covenant for only the house of Israel and the house of Judah, his action would have been in vain.. The covenant to which Jeremiah refers is a reaffirmation of an already present reality; namely, the inscription of God on the hearts of the people; the reality that the Jews, God's chosen people, already have all they need for relationship with God. Jesus, in stating that this blood of the new covenant is for *euch* and "for many" for the "forgiveness of sins" demonstrates an expansion of this covenantal understanding to all of humanity, creating opportunity for anyone outside of the houses of Israel and Judah to find their way into relationship with God through discovering the divine spark within. The sermon in Appendix B explores this understanding of new covenant from the Last Supper, along with the connection between Jeremiah and Luke, homiletically.

Conclusion

Jesus, then, establishes a covenantal reality that stays true to the vision of the Jeremiah covenant without committing supersessionism. For the houses of Israel and Judah, the imprint of God is already upon their hearts, ready to be found and followed. For those outside of the houses of Israel and Judah, Jesus opened up the door for the same reality to be discovered.

This demonstrates a harmony between the two covenantal understandings in these two separate religions, rather than a discord or outright supersessionism. It proves the possibility of interpreting both Jeremiah and the idea of a new covenant in Christianity without committing supersessionism while maintaining the relevance of both Jeremiah and the concept of new covenant for Christianity.

What maintains this harmony is the character of the God who covenants, a reality revealed by the ancient sources. Each grappled to understand how a God who never breaks promises, remains present within the hearts of all humanity, and seeks to make Godself known, through constantly reaffirming and reestablishing relationship with God's people, could either break a previous covenant or could choose to stop loving a people. While they struggled, just as so many of the modern era have, these ancient authors revealed the nature of covenant established by God: an unbreakable, unchangeable, promise to always be present and always be discoverable; for, as Jeremiah points out, the people of God are those who carry the imprint of God on their hearts. Such matters, for both Jews and Christians, who accept Torah as scripturally authoritative, worship a God who is understood as always consistent, keeping promises, never

failing.¹⁰³ A covenant that can be replaced or the terms and conditions drastically changed proves such a God false, for it proves that God can renege on promises and abandon a chosen people.

In fact, the harmonious interpretations offered in this paper of Jeremiah and Luke prove that God does not renege on covenant and seeks to expand such covenant through Jesus Christ. That expansion, rather than excluding the Jews, affirms their covenant by emphasizing the love of a God who has imprinted Godself on the hearts of the people. That love causes God to desire, through Jesus Christ, to bring more of humanity into relationship with God. These interpretations of covenant, then, whether through Jeremiah's vision or Jesus's body and blood, and maintain efficacy and relevancy for both faiths. God has indeed written Godself on the hearts of all of humanity and, through covenant, opened the doors for all of humanity to find God there.

¹⁰³ Num. 23:19, NRSV.

Appendix A

“In the Name of the Divine Spark,” by Rev. Ted Goshorn

First Sunday of Lent | February 22, 2015

Preached at Vineville United Methodist Church | Macon, Georgia

Scripture

Jeremiah 31:31-34, JPS

“See, a time is coming - declares the LORD - when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers, when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, a covenant which they broke, though I espoused them - declares the LORD. But such is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel after these days - declares the LORD: I will put My Teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No longer will they need to teach one another and say to one another, 'Heed the LORD'; for all of them, from the least of them to the greatest, shall heed ME - declares the LORD.”

Manuscript

The one that got away. It's a phrase uttered wistfully, wishing for something that didn't end up being. She's the one who got away. Or that's the deal that got away. The fleeting opportunity that got away without coming to fruition. It's a phrase that speaks of hope almost realized, and yet still speaks with hope. The one that got away might, one day, be the one that got realized, the hope that came to fruition. And so we say the phrase: The one that got away.

Last fall, I got introduced to a new band that I'm in love with. They're called *The Civil Wars*, a now defunct female-male duo that sings folk music with a rock beat. Their music often has a haunting quality to it. So much so that I find myself thinking and dwelling on lyrics for hours later. Such was the case with these lyrics:

Oh, if I could go back in time

When you only held me in my mind

Just a longing gone without a trace

Oh, I wish I'd never ever seen your face

I wish you were the one^{3:28}.

Wish you were the one that got away¹⁰⁴

How deep must the pain and hurt be that the singer could say, "I wish you were the one that got away." The depth of the hurt sat with me. Somehow, the person the singer references had hurt her so badly, the wound was so deep, she feels her life would have been better had they never been together, had they never even met. She wishes he was the one that got away.

It's like she's saying I wish the hope you'd introduced into my life had never been. I don't want relationship with you because it simply hurts too much. There's too much pain, there's too much history, there are too many chances given and squandered, there are too many sins forgiven and promises broken. Relationship is so beyond the state of repair that I wish you were the one that got away.

¹⁰⁴ The Civil Wars, "The One That Got Away," on *The Civil Wars* (New York: Columbia Records, 2013), audio recording, 2:53-3:28.

Maybe you can relate. I certainly can. There are relationships in my life that I wish were the ones that had gotten away. I wish I'd never had to experience relationship with him. I wish she'd gotten away so that the pain would never have been. Relationship was so deeply, painfully, incising that I wish the relationship had never been. I can relate: I wish you were the one that got away.

The phrase speaks to a history. Between two people, or even in a community of people, a relationship lasted long enough for there to be a history of hurt and forgiveness, a history of chances given and squandered, a history of hopeful new beginnings and devastating endings. There's a history that now characterizes the relationship. That history says, "I can't see you and not see the past, not see the history of pain and hurt and suffering. I can't see you and not see the sleepless nights, the tear-soaked pillows, the broken dishes or hear the raised voices and name calling. The history is so deep, so long, so painful, I wish I'd never seen your face. I wish you were a longing gone without a trace. I wish you were the one that got away.

That history, that long, painful, up and down history is the history of God and the people of Israel. Over and over again, God gives them chances to redeem their relationship and they squander them. At moments, there are hopeful new beginnings, always quickly followed by devastating endings. God forgives over and over again, and yet the people eventually squander that forgiveness.

That's where Jeremiah speaks to the people. The world is falling apart literally for the Israelites. Some blame God and say to God, "I wish you were the one that got away." Others blame God's messenger, and Jeremiah often finds himself in danger or, at least, often ostracized from society. They tell Jeremiah they wish he was the one that got away.

But Jeremiah is frank with the people: God isn't happy with you. Over and over again, God has given you chances, and you've squandered them. Over and over again, God has endured the pain caused by broken relationship, and yet still maintained covenant promises to always be your God, to maintain relationship with you. The hurt God feels is so deeply, painfully, incising, that God cannot remain silent about the people's promises broken, chances squandered, and sins committed.

We can easily imagine God saying to the people at this point, "I wish you were the people that got away. I wish I could go back in time when you only held me in your mind, just a longing gone without a trace. Oh, I wish I'd never seen your ancestors' faces, I wish you were the ones, I wish you were the ones that got away."

It may sound harsh, but we couldn't blame God for this, could we? We end relationships ourselves for far smaller infractions. The recorded history Jeremiah references, from the first kings to his time, spans almost 500 years. God has endured 500 years of promises broken, sins committed, chances squandered, all of which have hurt the heart of God deeply. It seems like now's the time for God to call it quits, saying "I chose the wrong people. I wish you were the ones that got away, but now I'll forget your faces, and choose a new people under a new covenant."

In fact, we can imagine reading the scripture in just this way. After all, God starts out saying "a time is coming...when I will make a new covenant..." A new covenant, one not like the one with the ancestors of the Israelites and the Judahites; a different one, a new one. It feels, here at the beginning of our scripture for this morning, like God's starting over. This didn't work

out; let's start again. God says, I wish they were the ones that got away. But no matter. I've learned from my mistakes. Let's do this again.

From this reading, it seems like the people had simply screwed up too much and now God would leave them behind. It's like God does, in fact, wish the Israelites were the ones that got away. So now it's time to start over.

I grew up with this idea that God could abandon promises God makes. The people had committed so many sins that God had left covenant relationship behind. This means, undoubtedly, that God can wash God's hands of a people, of a relationship, and simply walk away, abandoning the people.

But as I got older, I started to wonder, "what does that mean for me?! If I screw up too much, will God leave relationship with me? Can I sin so much that relationship between God and I will be irreparable?" Would God ever say to me, "I wish you were the one that got away?"

I lived much of my life with that fear. I wonder if you can relate? That fear that says that God's love for me has limits. I have to be good, I have to make sure I'm following the rules, set forth by Jesus and interpreted by my church community, or else I might screw up so much, even without knowing it, that God will say to me, "I wish you were the one that got away."

In a world where so many relationships fail, where so many relationships leave behind bitter, painful, memories, it's hard to imagine a relationship, even with our divine creator, that can never falter nor fail. Can we really believe that this God of ours would never leave relationship with us? Can we really believe that this God of ours would never stop seeking us? Would never stop pursuing us? Would never say to us, "I wish you were the one that got away."

That's the question the people of God, the Jews, are asking as they sit in exile. Can we really believe that this God of ours would never stop seeking us? Even though we've screwed up so much? Even though we're clearly undeserving? After so many chances that we've squandered, after so many promises that we've broken, after so many sins that we've committed, could relationship really be repaired? Does God still want us? Does God still love us?

With a resounding "Yes!" God Says to the Jews in exile relationship can be repaired, for God does still want and love the people. God affirms this in our scripture, saying: "But such is the covenant I will make with the House of Israel after these days - declares the LORD: I will put My Teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts. Then I will be their God, and they shall be My people"

Clearly, God is not starting over. God is not saying to the people "I wish you were the ones that got away." They haven't screwed up so much that God will leave them. Even though they've squandered their chances, broken promises, committed many sins, God is not abandoning God's promise to their ancestors to be their God and for them to be God's people.

Instead, God says loudly and clearly, "I will be their God. I will be the God of the House of Israel, the Jews. I will not abandon you, I still want you, I still love you, I wish you never got away."

So can we really believe that this God of ours would never stop seeking us? Would never stop pursuing us? Would never say to us, "I wish you were the one that got away?"

God answers us still with a resounding Yes! We can cling to the covenant promises of Jeremiah because it reveals the character of God. This God of ours doesn't break promises, this

God of ours never abandons relationship, no matter how many chances we've squandered, no matter how many sins we've committed, no matter how many promises we've broken.

I wish you never got away. That's what God says to us this day through the prophet Jeremiah. I wish you never got away, for you have always been a part of me. God has put God's Teaching, knowledge of God, into the depths of our very beings for we are created in God's image. We carry around the very image of the God we abandon, the God we squander, the God we hurt.

And yet, says God, I have inscribed knowledge of me on your hearts. You are my people. You already know what you should do. So do it. Heed me. Follow me. Even now, return to me, for I wish you never got away.

Maybe today, you're the one who got away. You've broken promises, squandered opportunity, desecrated the image of God. God says, I wish you never got away. Even now, return to me.

Regardless of the state of our relationship with God, as we begin this Lenten season, we are all called to focus more deeply, more purposefully, on God. This time of year, we often think of what to give up, or what spiritual discipline to add, or both. We stop eating all meats but fish on Friday, we give up chocolate, alcohol, carbs and we add in more prayer, more scripture reading, more devotional time.

We focus on what we can do for God to maintain relationship with God. But hear again what God says in Jeremiah: "I will put my Teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts."

The action here is God's. I will put, I will inscribe. The action isn't ours. We focus so much this time of year on what we can do for God, when God's call is much simpler. Look inside of yourself and find that inscription. Hit the pause button on life and sense the Teaching inscribed on your heart.

Lent is a season to give things up and to take on extra disciplines not because we do something for God, but to remind ourselves of what's already there: a divine spark within each of us.¹⁰⁵ God's image, God's teaching, a divine spark, lies inscribed on our hearts.¹⁰⁶

As human beings, created in the image of God, we carry around with us that inscription whether we mean to or not. The question is, are we pausing enough to notice? Are we stopping our lives long enough to take heed of the God who declares to us "you are my image, you are my people, and I am your God?"

This Lent, pause. Pause long enough to say to God, as we sang earlier this morning, "I need you. O how I need you." For in that moment of pause, of rest, we will know the reality of the inscription of God's Teaching in our inmost being, on our hearts. We will know God as we pay attention to that divine spark.

I'm busy enough to be aware that pausing is hard. To pause life, to find a moment, even five minutes, to hit the pause button to hear the inscription of God on our hearts speak, to sense the divine spark within, seems impossible. But it's in exactly our lack of pause that we find ourselves wandering away. The less we listen to our hearts, the less we pay attention to the inscription of God that lies there, the less we notice the divine spark, the more we find ourselves

¹⁰⁵ Sweeney, 991.

¹⁰⁶ Coogan, 374.

breaking promises, committing sin, and squandering chances. To remain busy is the fastest way to become the one that got away.

God calls to us from inside our hearts, where God has been all along. We may try to get away, we may even feel like the one who got away, but God's inscription remains on our hearts. God has always been there, calling out our names, speaking to us, as we sang this morning:

I hear you calling out my name in the stillness of my heart

Your grace is given me again,

Now I open my heart.¹⁰⁷

There's a longing inscribed on our hearts that comes up from our innermost being. That's God's love for us. "Love is, and always was, the longing placed inside our hearts to know and be known by God."¹⁰⁸ God is our God, and we are God's people. This is an unbreakable relationship. No matter the chances we've squandered, no matter the promises we've broken, no matter the sins we've committed, God is our God and we are God's people, marked inside our inmost being with the inscription of God; bearers of the image of God. When we become the one that got away, all we need do is pause our lives long enough to turn inside, to our hearts, to hear God calling our our names in the stillness.

This Lent, pause your life. Respond to that longing, that inscription on your heart, of God that cries from your innermost being. Keep a practice of silence, tune out the world, turn inward, and listen to your heart. In listening in the stillness of pausing our lives, we will hear the cry of

¹⁰⁷ Aaron Shust, "Stillness (Speak to Me)," on *Anything Worth Saying* (Atlanta: Brash Music, 2005), audio recording 1:17-1:38.

¹⁰⁸ All Sons and Daughters, "Title," *EP No. 3* (Colorado Springs, CO: Integrity Music, 2012), cover text.

the inscription of God that lies there. "No matter if you're the one that got away, God says, Even now, return to me. I wish you never got away, for you will always be my child."

Appendix B

“The Blinding Fog,” by Rev. Ted Goshorn

Maundy Thursday | April 2, 2015

Preached at Vineville United Methodist Church | Macon, Georgia

Scripture

Luke 22:14-20, NRSV

“When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.’ After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, ‘Take this and divide it among you. 18 For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.’ And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.’”

Manuscript

Today is Maundy Thursday; Maundy, literally, command Thursday. It’s a day we remember not only the Last Supper, as Jesus gathered around the Passover table with his disciples. We also remember Jesus’s command to “do [communion] in remembrance of me.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Luke 22:19, NRSV.

It's an odd command, isn't it? Do communion in remembrance, the idea that we should do it with some frequency. Paul, in 1 Corinthians, adds the phrase that we all know so well: "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."¹¹⁰ Remember the Last Supper often; do communion often; is the maundy, the command, Jesus gives us.

Certainly, tonight is a monumental night in the life of the church. It's a day of preparation for Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It's good and right and true to celebrate it tonight as we prepare our hearts for the depths of the crucifixion and the heights of the resurrection.

But consider that we, as the church universal, set aside one day a year for the birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, arguably the three most central pieces of Jesus' life for our life as the church. But in the Methodist church, we remember the Last Supper at least monthly. Here at Vineville, if you attend the Taize worship service, we remember it weekly. Why is that? Even in denominations where communion is less emphasized than the methodist church, they still serve at least quarterly. Why?

Why is it that Jesus would command us to remember this particular night, do this particular act, often?

I greatly anticipated the end of January, 2009. In the November before, I phone interviewed with Mercer University for the position of Coordinator of Orientation. That interview led to an interview on campus as a finalist for the position, scheduled for late that January.

For the year and a half before that, Dana and I had lived a wonderful life in Harrisonburg, Virginia, while I attended graduate school at James Madison University. We loved Virginia, we

¹¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:25, NRSV.

loved the Shenandoah Valley, and we loved our friends, but we felt a longing to return to Georgia, where both of our families lived. That year, much as with the rest of this country, jobs were harder to come by because of the economic downturn just a few months earlier. So to have a finalist interview in Georgia, at a great university, for a job that sounded made for me, led to great excitement and eager anticipation.

My great anticipation in the days leading up to leaving turned to great anxiety. The weather forecast showed a blizzard coming in. The night before I traveled to Macon I waited, watching the night sky, hoping for the best. The morning of my travel day came with no snow, no ice, no precipitation. So I left Harrisonburg, headed down Interstate 81, and turned eastbound on Interstate 64, headed toward the airport in Charlottesville.

If you know the Shenandoah Valley, if you know Charlottesville, you know that to get to Charlottesville from the valley, you must cross the Blue Ridge Mountains. I started up the mountain climb and encountered snow. I worried a little, but I pressed onward. As I climbed the mountain, the snow picked up, and traffic slowed. I found myself boxed in, cars all around me, all of us moving more and more slowly.

As we all, together, reached the summit, the snow fell even more heavily and a dense, thick, fog, set in. I was behind a pick-up truck on the way up the mountain, about a car length behind. In the fog, I couldn't even see that far in front of me. On the way up the mountain, I was in the middle of three lanes. As I crested the mountain, the fog was so thick, I couldn't see cars to my left or to my right.

I was stuck. The fog was so thick that I felt trapped. The snow falling in front of my headlights started turning to ice on the road. The heat on my window defogger could barely keep

up with the moisture coming through my car's vents. I couldn't see to my right, to my left, to my front, or to my back. I couldn't stop, because cars behind me couldn't see me and I'd start a chain reaction of accidents. I couldn't speed up, because I'd hit the truck in front of me. Being in the middle lane of three, I couldn't pull off to the side of the road because I would run into a car. And besides, even if I'd been in the right or left lane, I wouldn't have been able to see the guard rails and would have run the risk of driving off the side of the mountain. All I could do was hold my speed, pay close attention, and hope for the best.

I was scared out of my mind. I didn't care if I made it to Mercer that day. I didn't care if I made my flight. I just wanted off the mountain.

For what felt like hours, I'm not sure how long it was exactly, I held my speed, paid close attention, and looked desperately for the faint red glow of tail lights to tell me if I was getting too close to the car in front of me. I knew those taillights were there, just like I knew the road was there and the mountain was there, but I couldn't see any of it.

I looked blindly for what I knew was there, but couldn't find. The fog was too thick.

In our scripture this evening, Jesus takes the bread and the cup, holding them up, declaring them to be his body and blood of the new covenant, broken and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Every month, at least, we as a church "do [communion] in remembrance of" Jesus, remembering not only Jesus's actions here at the Passover meal, but what they represent: the crucifixion; the breaking of Jesus's body and the shedding of his blood. We remember that, in this act symbolized at the Table, Jesus instituted a new covenant, for you and for many.

We remember. At many tables at churches, including at my first appointment, the communion table reads “Do this in remembrance of me.” Certainly, we recall Jesus’s sacrifice and death whenever we approach the Table, especially on this evening in particular, when we remember that Last Supper so many years ago.

Communion has an aspect of remembrance, but why does Jesus command us to take of bread and wine regularly? We certainly can remember the Last Supper and the crucifixion without the act of taking the bread and wine. Furthermore, why do we as a church do this act so often? We remember other significant acts of Jesus only one time per year. Once a year is enough to remember the crucifixion on Good Friday, the resurrection on Easter Sunday, and the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day. Certainly, these are major events in the life of the church; they’re even how we organize our calendar. Why, then, do we have communion so much more frequently? Why does Jesus ask us to do this often?

I didn’t grow up methodist. When I started attending a methodist church, I was surprised by how often methodists took communion. Why monthly? And why all the words? And why the congregational response? The church where I grew up had the pastor say only a few words. In the methodist church, we said all sorts of stuff together, and then the pastor gave this long liturgy. Why all that?

I didn’t know, but as I received communion at Martha Bowman United Methodist Church, where we attended church before I joined the ministry, I knew communion was something special, because I felt it doing something inside of me. Perhaps I sensed it working within me because of my journey away from faith and then back to it; perhaps it was just because I matured; perhaps it was simply the movement of the Holy Spirit. But at Martha

Bowman, receiving the elements often made me feel as though something more than remembrance, something meaningful and deep, was occurring as I participated in the liturgy and took of the bread and wine. Something special, something meaningful, something deep, something powerful, occurred every time I took communion.

I imagine you have experienced communion like that in the past. So maybe this is why Jesus asked us to do it often: to experience the depth and meaning and power of the sacrament.

But what happens during communion? What makes it meaningful, deep, and powerful; more than just remembrance?

It took me a while, but eventually I found an answer. At the communion table, in the midst of this sacred moment, I would catch a special glimpse of the divine.

As a people created by God, we carry around the image of God; we have God's imprint on our heart. One Jewish tradition calls this reality a divine spark that exists within all of us. God is there, in our innermost being, inscribed on our hearts.

But too often, we're blind to this fact. Our spiritual lives are much like my trip across the Blue Ridge mountains. Before we know Jesus personally, around that imprint, around that divine spark, exists a fog; a fog that's so dense, we might only occasionally catch fleeting glimpses of the divine within, on our hearts; like catching a fleeting glimpse of the red tail lights on my mountain drive. We can try as hard as we might to see the divine within us, but try as hard as we might, we almost always miss it, because the fog of sin around God's imprint on our hearts is so thick.

When we come to the table, the fog clears for a moment. We receive a special imparting of God's grace through this act of communion into our lives that helps clear the fog. Wherever

we are on the faith journey, whether we have made a personal commitment to relationship with Christ or not, God's grace comes in and clears the fog, even if for a moment, so that we can see God's imprint on our hearts.

For me, this clearing of the fog makes the moment of communion feel holy, sacred, special, deep, and powerful. For others, communion can feel like a joyous celebration. How we experience communion can be as varied as humanity itself, and sometimes we may feel nothing at all.

But God's grace remains at work through communion, clearing the fog of sin, no matter how, or if, we experience it. God's grace is such that we have a guarantee to receive it when we partake of the elements.

When we partake of these elements, the body and blood of Christ, we participate in Christ's new covenant; one marked by a grace that goes before, justifies our sin, and makes us holy. That's the nature of the new covenant we remember, and experience, when we come to the table, on this Maundy Thursday and every time we partake; the new covenant of God's grace extended to all people so that all might recognize God's imprint on our hearts and God's desire for relationship with us all.

The fog of sin is blinding, but God's grace, received at the table, gives us sight of the divine imprint within each of us. God is there, through the fog, longing for relationship.

As I came down the mountain, the fog gradually lifted and traffic started to speed up. We were still careful, knowing that the snow was starting to form ice on the roads and the fog might return. In fact, for the rest of my drive, the fog came and went; never as thick as it had been on

top of the mountain, but ever present, always a reminder to be careful and stay alert, in case the fog became blinding again.

That's how our spiritual lives go. We come into relationship with God for the first time and the fog clears, but then starts to return. It may never be as thick as it once was, for once we have come into relationship with God, we are never as blind as we once were to the divine within. And yet, the fog is always there, clouding our judgment, keeping us from fully seeing the divine imprint that lies on our hearts. Each time we receive, whether we're not yet a believer, are a new believer, or have lived a careful life with Christ for decades, God's grace clears our sight of the divine imprint within, deepening our commitment to Christ and instructing us in how to live a holy life.

So why did Jesus ask us to take communion often? So that we might not just remember the sacrifice, but also experience God's grace in our lives. We cannot clear the fog on our own; we need God's grace to do that for us. This is the wonder, the mystery, of the table; this is the wonder and the mystery of the sacrament, this is the wonder and mystery of Christ's sacrifice for us.

The fog is blinding, but God's grace, received at the table, gives us sight of the divine imprint within each of us.

Come, respond to this invitation to ever deepening commitment to relationship with God.

“Christ the Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sins and seek to live in peace with one another.”¹¹¹ [From here, the communion liturgy continues]

¹¹¹ The United Methodist Church, 7.

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