

Jeremiah 31:31–34 (Tanakh)

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.

For I will forgive their iniquities,  
And remember their sins no more.

## Into Their Inmost Being

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Jeremiah 31:31-34

Today we are given a passage that is foundational for Christians. God says, “I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah. I will put My Teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts.”

God says, “I will make a new covenant with the people. A new covenant, a new testament. This verse is where we get the name New Testament. This verse is the only place in what we call the Old Testament in which the phrase is used, a new covenant. This verse is foundational for us as Christians. The new covenant, the New Testament, is how we distinguish from what came before us.

But for Jews what we call the Old Testament is their whole Bible, the Tanakh, they call it. Tanakh is an acronym in Hebrew for the three sections of the Jewish Bible: the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. Not that you need to know that; but maybe one day that knowledge will come in handy, who knows? But the important thing is that for Jews this idea of a new covenant that appears in their Bible, the Tanakh, doesn't mean our New Testament.

The Bible, it turns out, isn't a singular document. Jews and Christians share some parts of it, and they often read those parts very differently. That's not even the end of it, though. Catholics include several Books in their Bible that we Protestants don't. And not only that, Protestant Christians may agree upon the books that are in the Bible, but groups or denominations of Protestants read those books very differently from one another. This little book that I hold in my hand, perhaps the most significant book in human history, means a lot of different things to a lot of different people, most of who believe it is the word of God in one fashion or another. It's a hard book. I don't mean it's a hard book like a calculus book. A lot of people may struggle to understand calculus, but the truth in a calculus book is clear and unequivocal. The calculus book contains the same truth for everyone who understands it. Not so much for the Bible.

So, I thought it might be interesting this morning to survey a few of the ways this important passage from Jeremiah about a new covenant is understood among various Christians and Jews.

For Jews Jeremiah is the prophet of the exile, often thought of as a prophet of doom. He prophesied Judah's destruction at the hands of the Babylonians because of the sins of the people. Jeremiah's whole perspective is one version of a theological controversy within the Tanakh itself. Jeremiah sees the destruction of Jerusalem as a direct result of the sins of the people. Other books, such as Job, argue against this idea that everything bad that happens is punishment for sins. In modern times, especially since the Holocaust, most people understand the disastrous results of thinking the Jews were destroyed for their sins. Nonetheless, as did the ancients, all of us today still struggle with why bad things happen to good people. And sin is one answer that is found in the Bible.

Jeremiah also prophesied a restoration when the punishment was over. The consolation is the part we are reading from this morning. “For I will forgive their iniquities, and remember their

sins no more,” says the Lord. In the end Jeremiah wanted to say that God was righteous and would restore his people, no matter what. And the promise of the new covenant written their inmost being and inscribed upon their hearts was a promise that God was faithful and that God’s goodness would be placed in the very being of the people. In later Judaism the kabbalah took it even farther. The Kabbalists said that all people have a divine spark written within them. So we see that within Judaism the Tanakh gives conflicting ideas of human nature and God’s nature and human nature and how to explain the things that happen in life, and Jeremiah gives one version, and even that version had had differing interpretations

And now the meanings get multiplied when we turn to Christianity. Christianity has tended to read the coming of Jesus Christ as God’s new covenant with the people. Christ himself is often called the new covenant. Many Christians, then, say that Jeremiah was actually predicting the coming of Jesus when he reported the coming of the new covenant. Indeed, Christianity commonly reads much if not all the Old Testament as a prophecy of the coming of Christ. Many say the coming of Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and promises. Think of our Advent and Christmas season when we turn to the prophet Isaiah and read of Jesus as the branch of the tree of Jesse. Think of the Gospel of John who sees Jesus as the Passover Lamb.

In this way many Christians describe continuity between the Old Testament and the New. The coming of Jesus is the beginning of the New Covenant, which will be fully fulfilled in the second coming of Jesus. Others see the new covenant as more of a break with the old. Christians, they say, are uniquely living under the grace of the new covenant. Others, including Israel, will have to wait until the second coming at least. Still others believe that the new covenant is a break from the old covenant entirely. The old covenant, they say, was a harsh covenant of judgment. The new covenant, they say, is a covenant of love, mercy and God’s grace, as different as night from day.

Holy smokes, those are lot of competing truths for a few verses in this little book to bear. And, of course, for many, the idea of conflicting truths is unbearable. Many prefer the calculus idea. The answer is either right or wrong. There’s one right answer, and they know what it is. The most strident in many religions insist that their version of the truth is the only one. From where I site, the evidence seems pretty clear that the idea that ‘there’s one truth, and I’ve got it’ doesn’t lead to a religion of love and mercy. But some are more than willing to sacrifice love and mercy to retain the purity of their truth. It makes me very sad; the results are so often heartbreaking.

But even if we set aside these intolerant notions of religious truth, we are left with two very important questions. One is how do we deal with conflicting points of view within the Bible or our theology? Earlier I spoke of the controversy that is expressed within the very pages of the Tanakh. Are the bad things that happen in life a result of our sin? Or are they more random than that? And then the next question, if the bad things that happen are more or less random, what’s God all about anyway? At the end of the book of Job, after Job has spent thirty something chapters arguing with his friends that he doesn’t deserve all the bad things that have befallen him, God appears. God says to Job’s friends, “Job was right. He was righteous. He wasn’t being punished for his sins.” And then God turns to Job and says, “So, smart guy, where were you when I formed the foundation of the earth?” In other words, “Hey Job, do you think you understand the mind of God?” So we’re left with no answer, a mystery, a conundrum.

Within the Tanakh itself we find conflicting views and evasive answers to life’s most perplexing questions. Many Christians find that intolerable. Most Jews, however, consider it to

be the nature of truth. There's an old saying that wherever there are two Jews there are three opinions. The implication is that Jewish readers of the Bible often disagree with themselves! But this does not mean that the questions and struggling with life's big questions is useless. Jews understand that the debates and the conversations about life and the Tanakh are part of the process of engaging with God. God is revealed in the debate, in the various ideas bumping against each other, and in the relationships between the arguers as much as in any right answer.

I believe there's a similar possibility in Christianity. Joanne Thomson, who some of you remember and who was the minister at Prospect Church back in the day used to say, "Every sermon taken by itself is heresy." What she meant was that any sermon, any interpretation of the Bible, on its own, is at best a part of the truth. It gives me more than a little comfort to think that all the contradictions I've preached and you have heard in more than thirty years of my sermons, all those contradictions I've given you were not a flaw; they were the pursuit of the truth. Kidding aside, I hope something like that is right. In any case, we do well, I think, to recognize that incomplete nature of even our most deeply held beliefs. The alternative is disastrous, both for us and others.

We've now come full circle. We can recognize that within both Christianity and Judaism there are multiple ways of reading a Biblical text. Indeed, we do well to understand that the text, like truth itself, at least the truth about life's big questions, is mysterious and ultimately impossible to fully fathom. We'll make more progress toward the truth if we listen as much as we talk, rather than insisting on talking past one another.

But that may lead us to the question of whether we can have committed beliefs. And can we meaningfully talk across contradictory committed beliefs. Considering our passage this morning, can I, a Christian, talk to a Jew about how I see Christ as the new covenant, for example? That depends. Such a conversation often fails to happen in one of two ways. One way the conversation fails is to butt heads and try to convert each other." Jesus is the new covenant; it's plain as day." No he's not; the new covenant is what God wrote on the heart of every Jew." You see how it goes. The other the conversation often fails is to make nice and avoid talking about any places where the differing viewpoints may be potentially explosive. Just find the common ground and keep everything superficial. Neither approach, neither self-righteousness nor superficiality, is very satisfactory.

What if we were, instead, to be interested in each other's perspectives? What if we were to hear the ways in which my Jewish friend thinks about the new covenant and how he sees it differing from my view? What if I were talk about the meaning Jesus the Messiah has for me without saying his view is wrong? The former New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl would have put it, "What if I could sing my song to Jesus without needing to call somebody else nasty names?"

Well good friends, I do believe we can do that. I believe it because I believe that in ways I cannot even express, and against all the indications to the contrary, that God has placed such possibility into our inmost being and inscribed it upon our hearts. If we can touch that, whatever we call that thing written in our inmost being—a holy spark, the mind of Christ or the words of the Torah—if we can touch that, our reading of scripture, our relating with others, and even our puzzling over life's deepest questions will have a lighter feel in both meanings. The conversations around life's questions will be brighter and less heavy. Amen.