

## HEBREWS CHAPTER 8

### [VI] THE NEW ORDER SUPERSEDED THE OLD ORDER (8:1 - 10:18).

Hebrews chapter 8 teaches a change of covenant.

#### 1. The old order sanctuary, priesthood and covenant contrasted with the new (8:1-7).

‘The chief point’ or ‘to sum up what we are saying’ (κεφαλαιον): The writer may feel that his argument about the superiority of the Melchizedek priesthood has been too difficult for some of his readers to follow, so he sums it up by saying, “What all this amounts to, what it all leads up to, is this: We have (εχομεν)(indicative present active) ‘such’ (τοιουτου)(of this superior order and quality) a high priest.”

Having established the superiority of the high priesthood of Christ and consequently the supersession of the Old Testament priesthood, the writer deals with the Old Testament temple, sacrifices and covenant, which are also superseded! Just as the Aaronic priesthood gives place to the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek, so the old covenant gives place to the new covenant, the earthly sanctuary gives place to the heavenly sanctuary, and the animal sacrifices, which were but temporary tokens, give place to the one sacrifice that is effective and of eternal validity. The writer contrasts three things: the old and new sanctuary, the old and new priesthood with their sacrifices and the old and new covenant.

##### a. The old and new sanctuary contrasted (8:1-2,5).

**8:1-2.** We have a high priest, Jesus Christ, who once in history ‘sat down’ (εκαθισεν)(indicative aorist active) and is now *sits enthroned* with God the Father on his throne in heaven.

We have ‘a servant of God’ (λειτουργος)(cf. Paul as servant of the Gentiles pertaining to spiritual things, Rom 13:6; 15:16; Phil 2:25) of ‘the holy things’ (των αγιων)(sanctuary) and (that is) of the ‘true’ or ‘real’ (αληθινος)(the antitype, cf. 9:11,24) ‘tabernacle’ or ‘tent’ (σκηνη) that is ‘set up’ or ‘pitched’ once in history (επηξεν < πηγνυμι) (indicative aorist active) by the Lord, not by man.

Jesus Christ is ‘a servant’ in the temple and discharges his ministry in no earthly temple but in the heavenly dwelling-place of God. The heavenly sanctuary is the only one which is not an imitation of something better than itself. ‘The heavenly sanctuary’ (8:2) is the dwelling-place of the living God. It belongs to the same order of being as ‘the everlasting rest’ of the saints (4:9), ‘the better country’, ‘the well-founded city’ (11:10,16) and ‘the unshakeable kingdom’ (12:28). Because God himself is ‘real’ (τον μονον αληθινον θεον)(Jn 17:3), so the other entities as the heavenly sanctuary is real (αληθινος) in so far they are associated with his reality.

**8:5.** The earthly priests serve *that (the sanctuary) which* is ‘a copy’ and ‘shadow’ of ‘the heavenly things’ (των επουραντων). From the outset, the old earthly sanctuary was designed to be nothing more than ‘a copy’ or ‘pattern’ (υποδειγμα)(9:23) and ‘shadow’ (σκια)(10:1) of the sanctuary that is in heaven. Compare other moral ‘examples’ in John 13:15; James 5:10; 2 Peter 2:6.

When Moses was about to begin building the tabernacle, he ‘was instructed’ (or ‘warned’)(κεχρηματισται < χρηματιζομαι)(indicative perfect passive) by God (and that instruction stuck while he carried it out). The word ‘instruction’ is used in the papyri of official pronouncements by magistrates, of a royal reply to a petition and of an answer of an oracle. In the New Testament it is used of ‘a divine communication or instruction’ (cf. Mt 2:12,22; Act 10:22; Rom 11:4). Moses had ‘to make’ (ποιησεις)(indicative future active)(the future tense expresses the Hebrew imperfect tense) everything according to ‘the pattern’ (τυπος) shown to him on the mountain (Ex 25:9,40; 26:30; 27:8). Moses did not merely receive *verbal directions*, but was shown something like a *visible scale model* of the sanctuary that was to be erected. It is also possible that he saw the heavenly dwelling-place of God in heaven itself, because the tabernacle was intended to serve as a dwelling-place for God in the midst of his people on earth and the earthly dwelling-place should be a replica of his heavenly dwelling-place. The conception of the earthly sanctuary as a copy of the heavenly sanctuary is also found in the book of Revelation (cf. Rev 11:19; 14:17; 15:5-6). In Revelation chapter 4 and 5 heaven itself is the temple of God.

The writer of Hebrews regards the relationship between the two sanctuaries in the Old Testament period as a *temporary* one, because the whole Levitical order *temporary foreshadowed* the spiritual order of the new age. At the first coming of Jesus Christ, the new age begins and God’s people live no longer with *the copies and shadows*, but with *the realities* themselves!

b. The old and new priesthood with their sacrifices contrasted (8:3-4).

**8:3.** Every high priest in the Old Testament 'is *repeatedly* appointed' (καθιαταται<καθιστημι)(indicative present passive) 'to *continually* bring' (προσφερειν)(infinitive present active) gifts and sacrifices (δωρα και θυσιας). Therefore it is necessary that this New Testament high priest (Christ) also has something to offer (προσενεγκη) (subjunctive aorist active). The aorist tense emphasises that this offer took place *only once in history!* The writer consistently emphasises the singularity of the sacrifice that Jesus Christ offered (cf. 7:27; 10:12). The writer is principally thinking of Jesus Christ offering himself as a sin offering on our behalf (cf. 1:3; 7:27).

**8:4.** The Old Testament high priesthood was (first legally and later illegally) confined to one family. If this New Testament high priest (Christ) were now on earth, he would not be a priest at all, because he was of the tribe of Judah and there were already other priests of the tribe of Levi who at this time offered the gifts according to the law. The law regulated who should be priests and it excluded all laymen (non-Levites) from priestly functions. On earth Jesus Christ was a layman! (Cf. the priesthood of laymen, of ordinary believers in the New Testament, 1 Pet 2:9-10).

c. The old and new covenant contrasted (8:6-7).

Because the ministry of Jesus Christ is directly in the heavenly dwelling-place of God itself, his ministry is accordingly *far superior to any earthly ministry (in any temple, mosque or church)!*

**8:6.** But 'now' or 'at this time' (logic particle, here also temporal) he has 'attained' or 'obtained' (and now possesses) (τετυχεν<τυγγανω)(indicative perfect active) 'a more differing' or 'more excellent' (διαφορωτερας<διαφορος) (comparative) 'ministry' (in a sanctuary)(λειτουργιας), 'by so much' (οσω)(instrumental case) as he is also the 'mediator' or 'arbitrator' or 'go between' (μεσιτης)(cf. Job 9:33) of a 'better' (κρειττονος) 'covenant' (διαθηκης).

The original covenant is God's promise that he would bless all the families on earth in the 'seed' of Abraham (Jesus Christ) (Gen 12:3; 22:18-19). By this covenant God would be the God of those who believed and walk among them and the believers would be the people of God (Lev 26:12). Much later (340 years later) God *added* the Law of Moses to this covenant with Abraham, not to replace the covenant with Abraham, but to serve as a mirror showing his Old Testament people their transgressions and as a schoolmaster guiding his Old Testament people to Jesus Christ (Gal 3:15-24). The writer of Hebrews limits himself to *this added part to the Old Testament covenant, the Law of Moses*, and calls it 'the first covenant' or 'the old covenant'. 'The second covenant' or 'new covenant' takes up *the fulfilment or reality* of the original covenant. Hebrews 8:10-12 shows why this second or new covenant is 'a better covenant' than the Law of Moses.

This better covenant has been 'legislated' ('enacted or ordained by the Old Testament law' and continues as a present reality)(νενομοθετηται<νομοθετεω)(indicative perfect passive) upon 'better' (κρειττοσιν) 'promises' (επαγγελιας). The new covenant has been promises in the Old Testament (Gen 12:3; 22:16-19; Jer 31:31-34; Luke 24:25-27,44-45; Jn 5:39-40; Rom 3:21).

**8:7.** For if that 'first' (πρωτη) *covenant* had been 'blameless' or 'faultless' (αμεμπτος), then 'a place' or 'occasion for' (τοπος) a 'second' (δευτερος) *covenant* would not have been 'sought' (εζητειτο)(indicative imperfect passive).

In Hebrews 7:22, Jesus Christ is called 'the guarantor (εγγυος) of the new covenant'. In Hebrews 8:6 he is called 'the mediator (μεσιτης) of the new covenant' (8:6; 9:15; 12:24). (The concept of a mediator is not taken from the Persian religion. Plutarch in his *Moralia* 369 alludes to Mithras as the mediator between Ormuzd and Ahriman in Persian theosophy). The concept of 'mediator' reflects its supreme ethical significance, typified in the '*reconciling* rainbow' encircling the throne, or in the ladder of Jacob's vision that *joined the separated* heaven and earth. The mediator is the perfect 'at-one-maker', who conserves the interests of both parties for whom he acts.

The 'better promises' are those recorded in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and are repeated in Hebrews 8:8-12. 'The better covenant' is the new covenant foretold by Jeremiah. The covenant of which Jesus is the mediator is 'a better covenant' simply because it is 'a new covenant' that fulfils and realises what the old covenant did not. If the old covenant had been perfect, it would not have required to be superseded by a new covenant. And the new covenant must be better; otherwise there was no point in replacing the old covenant with a covenant no better than it replaces.

**2. The old covenant definitely superseded by the new covenant (8:8-13).**

The new covenant is superior to the old covenant and has superseded it.

a. The old covenant broken, the new covenant established (8:8-9).

i) The old covenant made.

‘The first covenant’ is the Law of Moses that was later added to the covenant with Abraham. In the Old Testament, God made ‘the first covenant’ with the people of Israel at Sinai, after he delivered them from their slavery in Egypt. In Exodus 24:1-8, this covenant was confirmed by animal sacrifices and the sprinkling of blood on the altar, on the Book of the Covenant and on the people. Moses called it ‘the blood of the covenant’, that is, the shedding of blood which ratified the (added part of the) covenant. Hebrews 9:18-22 refers to this same ratification of the old covenant (the Law of Moses).

The essence of the old covenant as the Law of Moses is, “Obey me and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in the ways I command you, that it may go well with you” (Jer 7:23). But the people of Israel disregarded and disobeyed this covenant. God says, “From the time your forefathers left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. But they did not listen to me or pay attention. They were stiff-necked and did more evil than their forefathers” (Jer 7:24-26). Prophet after prophet recalled the people of Israel to their covenant loyalty. The blessings attached to the keeping of the covenant would still be theirs if they were obedient, but persistent disobedience would result in God’s curse. Finally, God charged Israel with breaking the covenant and threatened disaster (Jer 11:10-11). Thus, by predicting the inauguration of a new covenant, Jeremiah in effect announced the impending dissolution of the old order (of the old covenant)(Jer 31:31-34)!

ii) The old covenant reconfirmed.

The covenant was a very important topic in the days of Jeremiah after the priest, Hilkiah, had discovered ‘the book of the law’ (probably the law of Deuteronomy) in the temple in 621 B.C. (the 18<sup>th</sup> year of king Josiah) (2 Ki ch. 22-23). This discovery was followed by a solemn act of national repentance and rededication: The king “renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord – to follow the Lord and keep his commands, regulations and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book. Then all the people pledged themselves to the covenant” (2 Ki 23:3). The king’s repentance was genuine, but many people who took part in this ceremony and in the accompanying reformation of national religion did so largely by way of conforming to the king’s will. Jeremiah was quick to perceive this and to recognise that there was no ground for expecting this covenant to be kept any more than the covenant of Deuteronomy 29:1 of which it was essentially a reaffirmation.

iii) The old covenant broken.

**8:8-9.** If there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for a second (8:7). But God ‘found fault with’ or ‘blamed’ (μεμφομενος<μεμφομαι)(participle present medium) them (the people of Israel). The present tense stresses the *continual or recurring* finding fault with Israel (8:8). Israel did not ‘remain’ or ‘continue’ (ενεμειναν<εμμεινω)(indicative aorist active) in God’s covenant. Consequently, God ‘had no concern for’ or ‘neglected’ or ‘disregarded’ (ημελησα<αμελεω)(indicative aorist active)(cf. Heb 2:3!) them (NIV God turned away from them). What was wrong with the first covenant was that the people of Israel broke it! They *did not* keep the covenant! They *could not* keep the covenant. No *reaffirmation* of the Deuteronomy covenant or even the Exodus covenant could meet the situation.

iv) The new covenant established.

What was needed was a new covenant: new in character as well as new in time. Jeremiah proclaimed and predicted such a new covenant. The time would come when God would make a new covenant, ‘because’ (οτι) the old covenant had been broken.

The pronouns are in first person singular and the prophecy begins with the phrase “says the Lord”. Thus the speaker of this oracle is God. The Lord says, the days are coming when I will ‘bring to completion’ or ‘accomplish’ or ‘establish’ (συντελεσω)(indicative future active) ‘a new covenant’ (διαθηκην καινην) ‘over’ or ‘upon’ (επι) the house of Israel and the house of Judah. (The words ‘συντελειν διαθηκην’ replaces the words of the Greek translation ‘διαθησομαι’ (I will covenant), but are also used of a covenant made under Zedekiah to set Hebrew slaves free, Jer 34:8,15). Whatever Greek construction is used, they all represent the Hebrew “karath berith” (to cut a covenant).

This new covenant will ‘not be according’ (ου κατα) to the covenant, which God made with their fathers in the day he took them by their hand to lead them forth out of the land of Egypt. The new covenant will not simply be another covenant that reconfirms the first covenant made in Exodus or Deuteronomy. The second or new covenant will be *a different type of covenant, different in character. The old covenant characterised by externalities and temporality will be replaced by a new covenant characterised by internal renewal and permanence!*

The new covenant will be made with ‘the house of Israel’ and with ‘the house of Judah’. Jeremiah as prophet of the Old Testament period could not see ‘the mystery’ that was first revealed to the New Testament apostles, namely, that the believers in all other nations would be “heirs together with Israel, members together of one body and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 3:6). Like all the Old Testament prophets he could only see the future of God’s

plan with God's future people in terms of the real situation of God's people at the present, that is, in terms of the people of Israel. The people of Israel (with some exceptions) were at this time the only people of God. But all the promises made in the Old Testament find their fulfilment in Jesus Christ and his people (2 Cor 1:20)! Hebrews 8:1 shows that the writer of Hebrews applied this new covenant to God's New Testament people. "We (Jewish and Gentile believers) do have such a high priest".

b. God contrasts the new covenant with the old covenant (8:10-12).

**8:10a.** This is the covenant which I will 'covenant' or 'make' (διαθησομαι<διατιθημι)(indicative future medium) with (dative) the household of Israel after those days. The new covenant foretold in Jeremiah is set in contrast to the covenant, which the Lord made with the people of Israel when he delivered them from the land of Egypt (Ex 24:1-8). The prophecy of Jeremiah was spoken during *the days of national collapse*, not impossible during the brief period of Gedaliah's governorship at Mizpah (cf. "a time of trouble for Jacob", Jer 30:7).

*The life of God's people would be reconstituted on a completely new basis and on a new relationship between God and them would be brought into being. The new relationship between God and his people would involve three things: the implanting of God's law in their hearts, the knowledge of God as a matter of personal experience, and the blotting out of their sins.*

i) The new covenant consists of the implanting of God's law in the heart instead of trying hard to keep it.

**8:10b.** I will 'give' or 'put' (διδου<διδωμι)(participle present active) my 'laws' (νομους) into their 'mind' or 'understanding' or 'intellect' (διανοιαν). The participle could be used temporarily or it could express the manner or means of making the covenant: i.e., "I will make a covenant *by putting* ...". And I shall 'inscribe' (επιγραψω) (indicative future active) them on their 'hearts' (καρδιας). The future tense emphasises certainty! And I 'will be' (εσομαι)(indicative future medium)(the future tense emphasises certainty) to them 'for a' (εις)(verb 'to be' + preposition indicates 'to serve as') God, and they shall be to me 'for a' (εις) 'people' (λαον)(cf. 1 Pet 2:10; Rev 21:3 plural, cf. 5:9).

Although the people of Israel promised to keep God's covenant (Ex 24:7), they did not have the moral power to match their good intention. Although many Israelites probably memorised God's commandments (Dt 6:6-7), even that could not guarantee the performance of what was memorised. What was needed was regeneration, a new nature, a heart liberated from its bondage to sin, a heart which not only spontaneously knew and loved the will of God but had the power to do it! What was needed was a new covenant that could fulfil and realise what the first covenant could not.

God proclaimed the coming of that new covenant through the prophets, Ezekiel and Jeremiah. According to Ezekiel, the new covenant would consist of a new relationship to God, particularly characterised by the removal of all their sin, the removal of their heart of stone and the giving of a new heart and a new spirit, the putting of his Holy Spirit in them and thus causing them to obey his commandments (Ezek 11:19-20; 36:25-28). According to Jeremiah, the new covenant would consist of a new relationship to God, particularly characterised by the implanting of God's laws in the hearts of people, knowing God as a personal experience and the blotting out of all their sins (Jer 31:31-34).

The new covenant is *not new in regard to its substance*, namely, that God would be their God and that they would be God's people (cf. Ex 6:7; 29:45; Lev 26:12; Jer 7:23; 30:22; Ezek 11:20; Hos 2:23; Zech 8:8; 13:9; cf. 2 Cor 6:16).

Note in Rev 21:3 states the plural, 'his peoples' (λαοι), because God's covenant people is no longer restricted to Israel and Judah!

But the new covenant is *new in regard to its effect* – *it could impart this new heart, this regeneration through the Holy Spirit!* Thus, while *the formula of the covenant* remains the same from age to age, *the content of the covenant* is filled with fresh meaning to the point that it can be described as "a new covenant". The words, "I will be your God", acquires fuller meaning with every further revelation of the character of God. And the words, "you shall be my people", acquires deeper significance as the will of God for his people is more completely known. The New Testament reveals much more completely WHO God is and much more completely WHAT his people are and should be like!

ii) The new covenant consists of the knowledge of God as a personal an intimate experience instead of a national acknowledgement of God.

**8:11.** And they shall not 'teach' (διδασκω<διδασκω)(subjunctive aorist active) each man his 'fellow-citizen' (πολιτης)(translating Hebrew: neighbour) and his brother, saying, "Know (γνωθι<γνωσκω)(imperative aorist active) the Lord", because all will 'know' (ειδησουσιν<οιδα)(indicative future active) me, from the least to the greatest of them. The word 'οιδα' means 'to be intimately acquainted with', 'to stand in a close relationship to'. 'To know God' means not only to know theoretically of his existence, but also to have a positive relationship with him. 'Not to know God' does not mean to be ignorant about God, but not to want to know anything about him (2 Thes 1:8; Tit 1:16; Jn 7:28b; 8:19).

There was a sense in which the people of Israel knew their God, because he had revealed himself in words and deeds to them in contrast to the Gentile nations that did not know him. Although there were individuals who had a more personal and intimate knowledge of God, as David, the knowledge of God was generally *a knowledge about God*, a *national acknowledgement* of his past words and deeds, that they might ‘know’ (Hebrew: la-da’at) that he is God (Dt 4:32-35). Those who did not ‘know’ (Hebrew: jada’) God, did not acknowledge his holiness and did not obey his will (1 Sam 2:12). Already the second generation of Israelites in the Promised Land, Canaan, did not know the Lord, nor what he had done, and consequently they did evil and served idols (Judg 2:10-11). Even just before their exile to Assyria, there was no faithfulness, love or ‘knowledge’ or ‘acknowledgement’ of God in the land of Israel (Hebrew: en da’at elohim ba’arets, Hos.4:1). Knowledge of God was also closely coupled with ‘loyalty or obedience to the law’ (Hos 4:6; 6:6), ‘a doing what was right and just’ (Jer.22:15-17).

Thus, while in the old covenant, ‘the knowledge of God’ was simply *a national acknowledgement of God and his covenant*, reflected in their character and conduct, ‘the knowledge of God’ is *a personal knowledge of God*, which is possessed by each person of God’s people, because of the new heart they received. It is a personal and intimate knowledge of God (which marked Jeremiah too), by whom they are ‘known’ (Gal 4:9; 1 Cor 8:3), and it increases until it attains its consummation in knowing God even as God knows them (1 Cor.13:12; cf. 1 Jn 3:1-3).

In 1 Corinthians 8:3, ‘to be known by God’ (εγνωσται<γνωσκω)(indicative perfect passive) means that ‘he has come to be known and is all the time still known by God’.. The word ‘γνωσκω’ means, to ‘acknowledge’ or ‘recognise’. With God as subject, it means ‘to recognise someone as belonging to him’ or ‘to choose, almost = elect’ (cf. Amos 3:3). In these passages, *God’s knowing directed to man is the basis and condition for man’s coming to know God*.

iii) The new covenant consists of the blotting out of sins as essential to this new relationship.

**8:12.** I will ‘be merciful’ or ‘gracious’ (ιλεως εσομαι)(translating Hebrew: ‘eslach, to forgive)(cf. Heb 10:17-18) to their ‘unrighteousnesses’ (αδικια), and their ‘sins’ (αμαρτια) I will ‘by no means’ (ου μη) ‘remember’ (μνησθω <μμνησκομαι)(subjunctive aorist passive) anymore.

*Although the blotting out of sins was known in Israel, it was not a part of the old covenant, not a part of the promises belonging to the Old Testament covenant. In contrast, the blotting out of sins becomes essential to the new relationship with God under the new covenant! Forgiveness of sins is now written in the very terms of the new covenant (cf. Mk 1:4; Act 2:38; 3:19; 10:43; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14; Heb 9:22).*

Under the old covenant, God was compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness to thousands, forgiving their wickedness, rebellion and sin (Ex 20:6; 34:6-7a). He was incomparably a pardoning God, blotting out transgressions (Isa 43:25), sweeping away sins like the morning mist (Isa 44:22), treading sins underfoot and hurling all iniquities into the depths of the sea (Mic 7:18-19). If the people of God humble themselves, pray, seek God’s face and turn from their wickedness, then God would forgive their sins (2 Chron 7:14). But besides God’s forgiveness, also God’s retribution was emphasised for the impenitent (Ex 34:7b). God’s holiness must take action against the sins of people (Ex 20:5).

However, under the new covenant, the assurance of forgiveness of sins is written in the very terms of the new covenant. “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (Heb 8:12). When God *remembers* sins, he does something to people’s disadvantage, he makes them taste his wrath (Rev 16:19). Then God’s holiness must take action against the sins of people. But if God does *not remember* the sins of people, then it is *because his grace* has determined to forgive them, not in spite of his holiness, but in complete harmony with his holiness. His holiness had already taken action against sin in the death of his Son on the cross. Under the old covenant in its sacrificial system, there was ‘an annual reminder of sins’ (10:3). But under the new covenant there is no such remembrance of sins, because of the sacrifice that was offered once for all (7:27)!

#### Summary.

Therefore the writer of Hebrews teaches in Hebrews 7:22 and 8:6 that the new covenant is *a better and superior covenant* than the old covenant, because of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done. He is the mediator of the new covenant, fulfilling all the shadows of the Old Testament and making complete salvation a reality for every believer!

The old covenant at Sinai involved divine promises, but not promises like these. The three promises concerning God’s laws engraved in their minds and hearts, each individual knowing God personally and intimately, and sins that will be remembered no more, are ‘the better promises’ on which the new covenant is based. Based on the completed work of Jesus Christ, God will regenerate people and put his laws in their hearts; they shall all know God personally; and he will remember their sins no more! The fulfilment or realisation of such promises gives complete new meaning to the ancient covenant words: “I will be their God and they shall be my people”.

c. The old covenant is antiquated and on the point of disappearing completely (8:13).

**8:13.** In that he says, ‘a new *covenant*’ (καινην), he has ‘made old’ or ‘treated as old or obsolete’ (πεπαλαιωκεν <παλαιωω)(indicative perfect active) ‘the first *covenant*’ (την πρωτην). But that which is ‘becoming old’ or ‘obsolete’ (το δε παλαιουμενον)(participle present passive) and ‘grows old’ or ‘decrepit’ (γηρασκον <γηρασκω)(participle present active)(the word refers to the decay of old age) is ‘near’ (εγγυς) to ‘disappearing’ or ‘vanishing away’ or ‘destruction’ (αφανισμος)(the word is suggestive of utter destruction and abolition).

i) The old covenant is antiquated.

Central to the argument of the writer of Hebrews is the ‘abolition’ of the old covenant (the Mosaic Law) and its replacement by the new covenant. The very words ‘a new covenant’ antiquate the previous covenant. Jeremiah’s words clearly imply that when the future new covenant comes, it will supersede the earlier covenant. The apostle Paul regards himself and his colleagues as “ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit” (2 Cor 3:6) and regards the covenant associated with Moses as the old covenant (2 Cor 3:14). If the old covenant of Moses’ day is antiquated, then so must the Aaronic priesthood, the earthly sanctuary and the Levitical sacrifices, which were all established under the old covenant. The age of the law and prophets is past and the age of the Son is here and here to stay (Heb 1:1-2)!

ii) The old covenant with all that accompanied it is ready to vanish away.

“Anything that is growing old and ageing will shortly disappear” (NEB). It cannot be proved from these words that the Jerusalem temple was still standing and its sacrificial ritual still being carried on. These words could simply mean that by predicting the inauguration of a new covenant, Jeremiah in effect announced the impending dissolution of the old order. But if in fact the Jerusalem temple was still standing and the Aaronic priests were still discharging their sacrificial duties there, then the writer’s words would be all the more telling. Jesus (Mk 13:2; Jn 2:19) and Stephen (Act 6:14; 7:48-49) had foretold the downfall of the temple. Now the writer of Hebrews predicts it again. If the end of the temple and its ministry had been imminent 30 years before, it was the more imminent now that the 40 years of probation were more than three-quarters of the way towards their end (in 70 A.D.)(The book of Hebrews was apparently written around 64 A.D.).

#### **ADDENDUM: NEW MEANING TO THE OLD COVENANT WORDS.**

##### **1. The form of the covenant.**

The biblical covenant is much more than a contract or compact between God and man. It is not ‘an agreement between two parties who are more or less equal in status’ (συνηκη), but ‘a settlement by a superior on inferiors’, tendered on the one hand for acceptance on the other (διαθηκη). The early biblical covenant has closest affinities with the treaties, which bound vassal-states to their imperial overlords in the second millennium B.C.

##### **2. The substance of the covenant.**

The substance of the covenant is God’s promise, “I will be their God and they will be my people”. This promise was made to Israel while they were still in Egypt (Ex.6:7), when he had given them the law in the wilderness (Lev.26:12), just before their exile to Babylonia (Jer.31:33) and after their return from exile (Zech.8:8).

However, in the New Testament, this covenant promise of God that “he would be their God and they would be his people” was applied to the people of the new covenant, that is, to all Christians of all nations (2 Cor 6:16)! And in the new heaven and new earth Christians from all the “nations” (λαοι)(plural) will be “God’s people” and God himself will dwell with them (Rev 21:3)!

It makes all the difference in the world to the substance of the covenant when it is God (and not an imperial overlord) who takes the initiative in his grace, who bestows his promises freely on those whom he called to be his people, and who binds his people to himself with bands of love. Analogies illustrating God’s covenant should not be drawn from international politics, but from the family circle. God’s covenant relationship is like the relationship between a father and his children: “When I took them by the hand to lead them” (Jer 31:32; Heb 8:9). “When Israel was a child, I loved him. ... I took my people up in my arms, ... took care of them. I drew them to me with affection and love. I picked them up and held them to my cheek; I bent down to them and fed them” (Hos 11:1,3,4 GNB). God’s covenant relationship is like the relationship between husband and wife: “I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert” (Jer 2:2)(cf. Hos 2:7,14).

### **3. Not a renewal of the old covenant.**

In the second century B.C., the Qumran community endeavoured to realise the promise of the new covenant. The members of the community are described as entering into the new covenant in the land of Damascus (probably their wilderness retreat on the shores of the Dead Sea). Yet they looked forward to a new age which would revive the highest ideals of the old age: they looked forward to a renovated temple, which would still be a temple made with hands, to a pure sacrificial worship, which would still involve the slaughter of bulls and goats, to a worthy priesthood, which would still be confined to the sons of Aaron.

### **4. A complete abolition of the old covenant.**

To the writer of Hebrews, the new covenant does not involve the revival of the old covenant, but nothing less than the 'abolition' (8:13) of the old covenant with its old sacrificial order. This abolition is based on the high priesthood of the perfect and exalted Jesus Christ, his perfect and unrepeatable sacrifice and his service discharged in the heavenly sanctuary. Thus, true worship "in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:23-24) is released from dependence on the externalities (time and place) of religion.

### **5. The replacement of the old covenant announced at the Lord's Supper.**

Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper with the words, "This is the blood of the covenant shed for many" (Mk 14:24; cf. Mt 26:28) certainly refers to this *new* covenant (cf. Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). His words were the same as those of "the blood of the first covenant" (Ex 24:8) and Jesus intended to announce that now at length that earlier covenant was to be replaced by the new covenant foretold by Jeremiah. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross definitely had the effect, which Jeremiah said the new covenant would have. Paul and countless Christians have experienced the effect of Christ's sacrifice, "What the law could never do, because our lower nature robbed it of all potency, God has done: by sending his own Son in a form like that of our own sinful nature, and as a sacrifice for sin, he has passed judgement against sin within that very nature, so that the commandment of that law may find fulfilment in us, whose conduct, no longer under the control of our lower nature, is directed by the Spirit" (Rom 8:34 NEB).

### **6. The new covenant is extended to all believers.**

In Jeremiah's prophecy, the new covenant is to be made "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah", because at that time they were "the people of God". In the New Testament fulfilment, it is not confined to them, but extends to all believers of every nation. In the Old Testament itself indications are not lacking that the new covenant was to have this all-embracing character. While Jeremiah was not given to see what the new covenant would mean for the world, God did reveal it to Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 19:24-25; 42:6; 56:3-8; Romans 15:9-12). Nevertheless, this wider extension is implicit in Jeremiah, because national origin and racial descent must also be included among those externalities from whose control true religion is released by the new covenant. It is absolutely clear that in the New Testament, the new covenant is extended to people from every nation who are regenerated by the Holy Spirit! While people associated with the old covenant are characterised by their inability to understand or keep the law, people associated with the new covenant are characterised by regeneration by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 3:6,14)!

### **7. The new covenant has exactly the same meaning for both Israel and all the other nations.**

Two extremes must be avoided: It is one thing to say that Jeremiah was not given to see what the new covenant would mean for the whole world. It is entirely another to say that by Israel he really meant the New Testament Church. But it is also an error to suppose that the new covenant will mean something else for 'all Israel' than it does for the 'Church'. It is also an error to suppose that Israel will be saved in some other way than the Church. Just like not all people on earth will inherit the new earth, likewise not all people belonging to physical (ethnic) Israel will be saved (Rom 9:6). In the New Testament, God does not abolish physical (ethnic) Israel, but in saving (the elect in Israel) it transcends it, just as he does not scrap this present earth, but renews it! God fulfils his promise by saving a mass of Jews and a mass of Gentiles in the world (Rom 11)! Together they form 'God's people', coming from every tribe, language, people and nation (Rev 5:9; 1 Pet 2:9).

### **8. The new covenant is here to stay.**

The old covenant is antiquated and already in Jeremiah's time on the point of being abolished and disappearing altogether (8:13). *The age of the law and prophets is past and the age of the Son is here, and here to stay* (Heb 1:1-2; cf. Mt 5:17; Lk 24:25-27,44-45)!