

***A Response to Alon Goshen-Gottstein's***  
***The New Covenant - Jeremiah 31:30-33 (31:31-34)***  
***in Jewish Interpretation***

PHILIP A. CUNNINGHAM

pcunning@sju.edu

Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, PA 19131

I would like to thank Alon Goshen-Gottstein for his stimulating article, “The New Covenant - Jeremiah 31:30-33 (31:31-34) in Jewish Interpretation.” It is fascinating to see how different Jewish thinkers over the centuries have actualized the meaning of Jeremiah’s “new covenant” for themselves in their respective times. It is especially intriguing because “covenant” has been a rich subject for conversation between Jews and Christians in the unprecedented post-World War II interreligious dialogue.

In the interest of encouraging such conversation in *SCJR*, I’d like to share a few ideas that this article brought to my mind, some of which are tangential to its main focus on noteworthy readings of “new covenant” in Jewish thought. They are really the kinds of musings that might emerge in an informal chat over libations at the end of the day as topics for future exploration and are not meant as a formal academic “response.”

I wonder if a greater distinction needs to be made between the paucity of references to “new covenant” and the small number of explicit mentions of covenant more generally in Jewish writings over the centuries. It seems to me that the former is simply explained: it would be self-evident to Jewish sages studying Torah or Talmudic texts that they were not experiencing a time when “they shall no longer teach one another” (31:34) since they were doing precisely that. There really is no need to appeal to a general diminution of covenantal language to account for general Jewish disinterest in Jeremiah 31. Unlike Christian readers, who pointed to actual historical events to argue that a new eschatological age—with a reconfigured new covenant—had dawned (e.g., the destruction of the Temple or the Christianization of the Roman Empire), Jewish interpreters were typically more conscious of oppression in the world. This is why the various atypical Jewish mystical and philosophical readings of Jeremiah 31 that Alon Goshen-Gottstein presents are so interesting. Incidentally, the two traditions’ different perspectives regarding a “realized” or a “futuristic” eschatology also relates to the Letter to the Hebrews. To me, the “supersessionism” in that epistle is not that Judaism is being replaced by Christianity, but rather that the former age is in the process of being supplanted by the anticipated world-to-come because of the raising of the Crucified One to eschatological life.

I would also love sometime to discuss the suggestion that “both religious systems no longer privilege covenant as the central structuring religious ideal” (p. 5). Of course, it’s proverbially hard to prove a negative, and one line of thought I would want to pursue is E. P. Sanders’ classic characterization of the entirety of Second Temple literature as predicated on a pattern of thought that he called “covenantal nomism.” This basic concept has been, I think it’s fair to say, widely accepted by both Jewish and Christian scholars. It would indeed be interesting to learn how something so consistently defining could be displaced as a central structuring religious concept, especially when (as Alan Segal argued in a 1985 article) Jewish ritual and prayer is replete with covenantal language, even if sometimes implicitly.

And whenever my after-dinner conversation scenario unfolds, I’d also want to talk about communal identity and individual identity. In Jeremiah 31, the new covenant is written directly on the human heart. “It is thus more interior. Consequently, it is also more individual” (p. 6). That is surely one way of actualizing Jeremiah, but, particularly since he lived in a culture in which human identity depended on group belonging, his words could also be actualized today along communitarian lines. What lies in the “heart” of a society or religious community? Do the people collectively internalize the heart of the Holy One? This also involves human free will. Could not Jeremiah be understood as envisioning that “in the coming days” all Israel will *voluntarily* comport their wills to God’s because of the internalization of the mitzvot? Or to put it in later rabbinic language, could this idea be expressed communally as “in the coming days” the yetzer hara will be fully in tune with the fully realized yetzer hatov in all the people?

Again, my thanks to Alon Goshen-Gottstein for inspiring these ruminations!