Richard B. Hays explored the problem of Hebrews’ supersessionism in his monograph, “‘Here We Have No Lasting City’: New Covenantalism in Hebrews,” in which he documented the recent phenomenon of scholars beginning to question the assumption that the ancient homily depicted a supersessionist theology which left no place for the Torah or for the historical Jewish people.

Hays’ answer was that Hebrews’ “New Covenantalism” contains “both continuity and discontinuity;” while Jesus is portrayed as “the climactic figure of [Israel’s] story . . . he becomes the mediator of a new covenant that not only sustains but also transforms Israel’s identity.”

Hays’s monograph has had a lasting impact and several monographs have been written in response to it. The relevance of the discussion to Messianic Judaism is obvious, but the discussion is particularly relevant to Evangelical Christianity as well, because many commentators have questioned whether Hebrews’ use of the Old Testament is really warranted, which in turn casts serious doubt on the inerrancy of the Scripture. Jesper Svartvik observes that “those who use Hebrews 8:9 as a cornerstone for their theology at the same time silently confess that the Hebrew Vorlage (“prototype”) in Jeremiah 31:31f. is without importance.” Brueggemann, looking more broadly at Christian interpretation of Jeremiah’s oracle, came to a similar conclusion.

Understanding the implications of Hebrews’ use (or perceived abuse) of the New Covenant motif, Mark Nanos presented a response to Hays’ monograph entitled “New or Renewed Covenantalism? A Response to Richard Hays,” in which he argued that Hebrews may present a “renewed covenantalism” which “is conceptualized and described as
continued
but
augmented
to be made
effective
in a
new way
or to a
new degree
, freshening up something worn-out.”

Yet in the end even this use of Jeremiah’s New Covenant is, to Nanos, “finally incoherent;” quoting Wedderburn, he indicates his belief that Hebrews’ use of the New Covenant “inadvertently saw[s] off the branch on which the author sits.” This is true, for Nanos, simply because by appropriating the promises of the New Covenant for his community, Hebrews’ author invalidates the original context of Jeremiah’s oracle, and unrealistically overestimates the “reality of [his community’s] own experiences of covenantal life.” Furthermore, the author of Hebrews’ claim to a unique appropriation of the New Covenant is “triumphalistic and arguably arrogant and rude,” or else “supersessionistic,” depending on whether he really intended to negate all other priesthoods.

Nanos’s criticism of Hebrews appears at first to be justified, especially in light of the fact that as much time as Hays spends on Heb. 8, he still understates the case for a coherent use of Jer. 31 by the author of Hebrews, writing only that “Heb. 8 is less discontinuous with the original sense of Jer. 31 than Christian interpreters have often supposed.” For Nanos, this is not enough, and so it is from an Evangelical or Messianic perspective – the huge discrepancy between Jeremiah’s intention and Hebrews’ appropriation of the oracle in the majority view provides a problem for interpreters who adhere to a historical-grammatical method of exegesis and must prioritize the original context of Jeremiah 31.

The traditional solution of more conservative commentaries has been, unconvincingly, to read a particular view of Hebrews’ conclusions into Jeremiah 31. Everything from the abolition of the Sinai Covenant to the inclusion of the Gentiles is said to be wrapped up in Jeremiah’s oracle. This study takes a different approach, preferring rather to question the assumptions of the
consensus view regarding Hebrews’ occasion and purpose.

A truly Evangelical, post-supersessionist solution is possible. The author of Hebrews does indeed indicate a “renewed covenant” in this sense: that the parties to the covenant remain the same, and only the terms are altered. Yet this is not “triumphalistically expressed” continuity; the author of Hebrews has in mind primarily the plain meaning of Jeremiah 31:31-34, which underlies his midrashic treatment of the passage in Heb. 8; like the prophet Jeremiah, the author of Hebrews envisions a final restoration and renewal of all Israel in a state of obedience to the Torah, not a rejection of Israel (or most of Israel) in favor of a new people (or a small remnant). The Tabernacle and the covenants in Hebrews are used as temporal metaphors to underlie the author’s argument that his audience should renew their faith in the aftermath of the crisis of the Temple’s destruction.

THE NEW COVENANT IN JEREMIAH

Scholarship on Hebrews 8:6-13 often focuses almost exclusively on the author of Hebrews’ use of Jeremiah’s New Covenant oracle (Jer. 31:31f.) for his own rhetorical purposes, with reference to the use of said oracle by the DSS. Yet sufficient focus is rarely given to the oracle itself in its historical and social context. This may be for several reasons. Perhaps the meaning the oracle would have had to its original audience seems self-explanatory. Or perhaps scholars are pessimistic about the possibility of any relationship between the original meaning of the oracle and Hebrews’ appropriation of it. Yet for one with a high view of Scripture it seems careless either to discount any possible continuity between Jeremiah’s community and the audience of Hebrews, or to assume that Jeremiah’s oracle needs no explanation.

Jeremiah prophesied during and after the Deuteronomic reform under Josiah. Scholars debate whether Jeremiah opposed or supported the reforms; Thompson’s analysis, which holds that seemingly anti-reformist language (cf. 7:4f.) is a critique on the people’s failure to internalize the Deuteronomic ideal rather than a critique of the reform itself, is convincing, especially given Jeremiah’s consistence in exhorting the people to covenant faithfulness.

Jer. 31:31-34 is in the midst of the prophetic “Book of Consolation.” Opinions as to the date and occasion of this section of Jeremiah vary widely, with some arguing that it is a late insertion and others that it forms the core around which the surrounding material was organized. Yet whether it dates from early in Jeremiah’s career or from after the exile – or, as is probable, it
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contains developments from over the whole period
[16]
– the intended audience is clear. The “House of Israel” and the “House of Judah” are unmistakable references to the two separated kingdoms which together comprise the descendants of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the people group with whom God covenanted at Sinai. The whole reconstituted nation is evidently in view here.

Most commentators on Jeremiah are careful not to assume the perspective of Hebrews (or, rather, of the modern consensus as to Hebrews’ meaning). [17] So, for example, though Heb. 8 is surrounded by verses which appear to sustain a polemic against the Torah (7:12, 19; 10:1), many scholars recognize that Jeremiah sees the commandments of the Sinai Covenant being applied to the hearts of the one under the New Covenant.

[18] Davies has argued cogently against the idea that the New Covenant abrogates or annuls the written Torah.

[19] Indeed, an argument can be made that the blessing passages of the Sinai covenant are fulfilled in the New Covenant, and the cursing passages are canceled only due to the unfailing observance of the people of Israel under the New Covenant, so that the New Covenant can be said to subsume the Sinai Covenant without canceling it.

The identity of the beneficiaries of the New Covenant is also clear in Jeremiah – all of Israel; that is, the Jewish people as a whole. [20] Yet the majority view that Hebrews is designed to dissuade its audience from relapse into Judaism requires that Hebrews 8:6-13 be identified as a polemic designed to keep the audience from identifying themselves with the broader Jewish community by appropriating the New Covenant as a unique possession of the Messiah-believing community. [21]

Brueggemann describes the difficulty this way: “Thus we arrive at a profound tension between the OT text and the NT quotation . . . because the supersessionist case is given scriptural warrant in the book of Hebrews. My own inclination is to say that in our time and place the reading of Hebrews is a distorted reading.” In other words, if the majority view of Hebrews is correct, the author of Hebrews misappropriates and misinterprets Jeremiah 31:31-34. [22]

THE NEW COVENANT IN HEBREWS
The intent of the author of Hebrews in invoking the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31 is intimately connected with the author’s purpose, the date of writing, the identity and social situation of his audience, and the perceived problem he was trying to correct. As stated above, Jeremiah’s oracle promises a nationwide restoration of Israel in a state of blessing and Torah-observance. It appears on the surface that the author of Hebrews is applying this oracle in a different way or to a different group of people, to the exclusion of the original significance of the oracle.

The majority view since Chrysostom has been that Hebrews’ audience consisted of Jewish Christians who were tempted to revert to Judaism, or else who never completely broke with it (as, it is intimated, they should have). Since the nineteenth century, opinions on Hebrews’ audience have proliferated. Witherington modifies the traditional view by calling Hebrews “completionist” rather than a polemic against Judaism as such, yet in his schema the audience is still being urged to maintain its separation from the broader Jewish community.

DeSilva, another socio-rhetorical commentator, maintains that the audience of Hebrews is mixed and lacks any particularly Jewish background.

The occasion for the letter then becomes a “crisis . . . occasioned as a result of the difficulties of remaining long without honor in the world” due to the precarious social situation of the Christian community in the latter half of the first century.

The fact that even socio-rhetorical commentaries (which depend on building a coherent model of the social situation of the ancient readers) differ as to the ethnic identity of Hebrews’ audience does not bode well. Marohl, recognizing this difficulty, preferred to remain agnostic as to the ethnic identity of Hebrews’ audience in his social identity approach.

Yet the “old covenant” at Sinai included no Gentiles. It seems odd that Heb. 8-10 would have included what appears to be a sustained polemic against the Sinai Covenant had the audience not been party to it. And though apparent polemic against the Mosaic Law can be found in, for example, Galatians, it is connected with the problem of Gentiles converting to Judaism, a problem which does not appear to be in view in Hebrews. No mention is made of circumcision or indeed of Jews or Gentiles at all, nor of idolatry or pagan rites. Morrison’s sustained argument for the Jewish identity of Hebrews’ audience is most convincing.

Even if the audience is Jewish, though, Heb. 8’s appropriation of Jer. 31 remains problematic. Certainly in hindsight it is clear that the new age in which the children of Israel instinctively cling to and obey God and do not need to be taught about Him had not dawned in the first century, nor was it imminent. In hindsight, a first-century Jewish Christian community’s claim to be a literal fulfillment of Jer. 31:31-34 rings about as hollow as the same claim made by the
(Essene?) community which authored the DSS. Both the Qumran community and Jewish Christianity died out without seeing their apocalyptic expectations fulfilled. [29]

Yet in reading Nanos, who accuses Hebrews of having an unrealistic assessment of his community, one desires to lend the author of Hebrews some credit. Could it be that the author of Hebrews, of all NT authors having the greatest competence in Greek and such a mastery of oratory and rhetoric, [30] would be so foolish as to mistake the existence of his community for the return of the exiles in a state of perfect eschatological blessing and obedience? It is one thing to deprive him of the foresight to perceive that the final redemption was a long time off; it is quite another to postulate that he imagined himself as living then in the World to Come.

It is true that commentators almost universally acknowledge that Hebrews envisioned the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophetic oracle as only partial. But if only partial, then why postulate that Hebrews’ audience claimed sole inheritance of the New Covenant, to the (permanent?) exclusion of all other Jewish communities? While commentators are quick to point out the partial nature of the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s oracle, they seem reticent to acknowledge the ramifications of this partial-ness for Hebrews’ argument.

Bockmuehl wrote,

The undoubtedly supersessionist flavour of Heb. 8 and 9 is seriously misread if one takes it as the author’s general theological principle for the heritage of Israel and of the Old Testament. As the context of those chapters shows, the claim of obsolescence is in fact highly specific in its application, and concerns primarily the Old Covenant’s cultic apparatus of atonement. [31]

Like Nanos and Hays, Bockmuehl recognized that Hebrews criticizes only the Levitical cult among the institutions of the Old Testament. Yet Bockmuehl emphasized also that Hebrews’ exegesis of Jer. 31 is subservient to this purpose – to show that a greater form of atonement exists.
In a similar vein, Lane has made the observation that the seeming anti-Jewish polemic in Hebrews is limited to the exegetical sections; the paraenetic sections give no hint of a differentiation from Judaism. In addition, since in Hebrews paraenesis takes priority over exegesis, the polemical statements in Hebrews must be seen in light of the author’s paraenetic goals. [32]

Jesper Svartvik made several lucid observations about Hebrews that, when combined, give the reader a significantly different perspective on Hebrews’ argument. First, he noted the correlation and at times convergence of the temporal and spatial metaphors in Hebrews. [33] Second, he noted Hebrews’s use of Middle Platonic thought in its comparison of Messiah and the Messiah-event, which represent the real or the ideal, and everything else in this world, which represents only a shadow of the ideal. [34]

With these observations in mind, Svartvik took Heb. 9:9 as a point of departure for his argument that Hebrews is essentially contrasting the present age, which still stands, with the coming age, which has not yet arrived. The present age is symbolized by the earthly tent, i.e., the Tabernacle; Heb. 9:8 therefore asserts that “the way into the sanctuary is not yet opened as long as the outer tent [symbolic for the present age] is still standing.” [35]

Therefore, while Messiah is the minister of a better covenant and currently ministers in a better Tabernacle, the eschaton remains unrealized. The “Old Covenant” is then equated with the present age, which, along with the Covenant itself, is ready to pass away (8:13). [36] However, it has not yet passed away – it is only getting ready to pass away. Nowhere does the author of Hebrews actually state outright that the Levitical worship, the Mosaic Law, the Sinai Covenant, etc., have actually passed into obsolescence. [37]

It is apparent, two thousand years later, that the present age is still dominant. If Svartvik is correct in finding Middle Platonic philosophy undergirding Hebrews’ argument in chs. 8-10, and if the spatial metaphor of the Tabernacle is really representative of a chronological reality (this
age vs. the age to come), then it would still be appropriate today to say that the Sinai Covenant, the legitimacy of the Levitical priesthood, the Mosaic Law, etc., are getting ready to pass away, but have not yet.

Thus if Hebrews’ author is not trying to keep his community from Judaism but, as has been argued by proponents of the “Radical New Perspective on Paul” regarding Pauline communities, regards his community as a part of Judaism, then Lane may be correct in asserting that the author of Hebrews used “homiletical midrash” to interpret Jeremiah 31 in order to establish his central theme of the importance of heeding the word of God, specifically in Christian preaching.

Yet Morrison’s critique of the position that Hebrews’ author is only trying to combat lethargy rings quite clearly: “When the expository section emphasizes that A is better than B, and the subsequent exhortation is, ‘Choose A,’ the implied exhortation is, ‘as opposed to B.’” From what was Hebrews’ author discouraging his audience?

Here the date of Hebrews comes into play. The traditional view places Hebrews before the destruction of the Temple, so that Hebrews can be said to argue against the necessity of participating in it. But is it possible that the recipients of Hebrews no longer had access to the Temple, not because of social pressures, but because it was destroyed? The possibility that Hebrews is a response to the destruction of the Temple has been explored in different ways by Eisenbaum and Gelardini. It may be that this horrific event and the subsequent failure of the eschaton to arrive caused Jewish Christians to falter in their faith; the author of Hebrews may be trying to encourage them to reappraise their valuations of the Levitical cult and of Messiah’s sacrifice in an attempt to rejuvenate his community and keep them from losing faith altogether (argued here to be the “B” to which Morrison referred), rather than dissuade them from the Temple cult or from practicing a form of Judaism.

In this light, Bockmuehl appears correct in writing, “The superiority of the New Covenant introduces not a new people of God so much as a newly energized worship of God – constituted around the definitive and permanently efficacious sacrifice. It is that difference in which the discontinuity of the covenants subsists, not in the identity of the people of God or even in their faith.”
So Hebrews’ community, in the light of Jeremiah’s oracle, may have perceived itself not as a new people of God to the exclusion of (the rest of) Judaism. Rather, their existence is evidence of the coming age, and the imminent fulfillment of God’s promises through Messiah. Like Messiah himself, they are the first-fruits, a down payment, as it were, on the promises of God, which remain yet to be fulfilled.

This reading of Hebrews substantially vindicates the broader conservative Evangelical perspective that sees Hebrews as fairly interpreting and appropriating Old Testament scriptures, and building strong continuity with the Old Testament people of God. Yet it differs from the standard Evangelical reading of Hebrews in that it retains a high view of Judaism, the Jewish people, and the Mosaic Law. In time this perspective may be found to be more resilient, as critical scholars continue to emphasize the consensus view of Hebrews’ marginalization of the Old Testament people of God and the problems this theology encounters when faced with a fair reading of the Old Testament itself.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued for a post-supersessionist reading of Hebrews which attempts to set it in its historical context within first-century Judaism and argues that it does not misappropriate or misinterpret Jeremiah’s oracle of the New Covenant, but rather sees its community as, perhaps, the “first-fruits” of a general revival among the Jewish people, connected with an imminent eschaton.

Hebrews’ appropriation of the New Covenant motif is not designed to marginalize or discredit Judaism as such, but rather to contrast the present age with the age to come, and to encourage its readers to invest in the latter, even as the community deals with the continuing reality of the Temple’s destruction and the tarrying of Messiah.

Despite the glut of monographs on Hebrews over the past few decades, it has yet to be systematically approached from a post-supersessionist perspective. Some work has been done by Nanos, Eisenbaum, Svartvik, Hays, Skarsaune, Bockmuehl, and others, but no major commentary, monograph, or dissertation of which this writer is aware has attempted to synthesize these insights into a coherent, complete, post-supersessionist picture of Hebrews’ theology. Furthermore there remains much more work to be done in investigating the potential
for Jewish interpretive methods such as *midrash* in Hebrews. There remains a veritable gold mine of insight to be gleaned from Hebrews once the author and his community are placed firmly within first-century Judaism.

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[5] Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 291–292: “This oracle of promise . . . has frequently been preempted by Christians in a supersessionist fashion, as though Jews belong to the old covenant now nullified and Christians are the sole heirs of the new covenant. ... Such a preemptive reading ignores the text itself. Moreover, such a rendering of the future could hardly be expected or cogent in the midst of these several promissory oracles which anticipate the reconstitution of the Israelite community. Such a supersessionist reading in fact asserts the rejection rather than the reconstitution of Israel, a point not on the horizon of these oracles.”


[7] Ibid., 185.


Ibid., 188.

Hays, “‘Here We Have No Lasting City,’” 162.


Thompson, Jeremiah, 62.


Thompson, Jeremiah, 551-52.

But see, for example, Charles Feinberg, Jeremiah: A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 218-220.

Brueggemann, Jeremiah, 293; Keown et al, Jeremiah, 134; Susanne Lehne, The New Covenant in Hebrews (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 34.


Cf. Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 227: “As in his other exegetical arguments, our author is not particularly interested in the original context of what he cites.” Lehne, *New Covenant in Hebrews*, 31: “There can be no doubt that the writer puts Jeremiah’s oracle to a use rather foreign to the intentions of the prophet. ...We have definitely left the realm of the OT.”


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[29] Contra George Guthrie, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 290, who believes Christians constitute a “new Israel” or “true Israel.” Yet for Jeremiah’s oracle to be fulfilled it must actually involve the “house of Israel” to which Jeremiah actually prophesied – the Jewish people, who were conspicuously absent from the Church from about the fourth century onward (though many Jews converted after that time, they lost their Jewish identity and their children grew up as Gentiles [see Mark Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 181-212, esp. 210f.: “In forbidding rather than requiring Torah observance from its Jewish members, the ekklesia annulled its right to claim continuity with biblical Israel. Its leaders may have thought they were striking a blow against Judaism and the Jewish people, but in fact they were also wounding themselves by undermining their own ecclesiological identity. Supersessionism and the crumbling of the ecclesiological bridge, i.e., the Jewish ekklesia, damaged the church in a profound way.”]) Soulen wrote, “The acid test of the church’s theological posture toward Israel’s election is the church’s conduct toward Jews in its own midst, that is, toward Jews who have been baptized. For it is here that the church demonstrates in an ultimate way whether it understands itself in light of God’s eternal covenant with the seed of Abraham. If the church acknowledges the abiding reality of Israel’s corporeal election, it will naturally expect baptized Jews to maintain faithfully their Jewish identity. But if the church truly believes that it has superseded God’s covenant with Israel, it will prohibit or discourage Jews from preserving their identity as Jews and members of the Jewish people.” R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 11. To use a rather crude analogy, for a man to divorce his wife and marry another, all the while claiming fidelity to “his wife” while discarding the first woman, reinterprets his first marriage vows so severely that they mean practically nothing.


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[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., 85.

[36] Ibid., 86-87.

[37] Paul Ellingworth, Hebrews (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 418-19: “The continued existence of the first covenant is never completely denied. …The statement falls short of saying that the old cultus has already disappeared.”


[39] Lane, Hebrews, cxxiv.

[40] Ibid., cxxvii.

