The Prophecies of Jesus

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Lesson 10

1. Hello. My name is Ken Samuel, and this is the tenth part of an eleven-part series on the prophecies of Jesus that was originally created by Stephen Katz of Jews for Jesus. Today we’ll look at Jeremiah 31:31-34. <click>
2. “‘Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.’” <click>
3. So, the missionaries say that the new covenant that Jeremiah prophesied was initiated by Jesus when he died. In this one-way covenant, God promises to forgive our sins. Jesus said this at the last supper: <click> “And Jesus took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’” <click> The book of Hebrews makes it clear that Jesus is associated with the new covenant in Jeremiah’s prophecy. “... and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant...” “This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.” “Therefore, Christ is the mediator of a new covenant...” “But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.” And if there’s any doubt that these verses are referring to Jeremiah 31:31-34, <click> the author of Hebrews quotes them: “For Christ finds fault with them when he says: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord...” I ellipsised out most of the quote because, a) we’ve already read it, and b) it wouldn’t fit on the slide. And by the way, this is the answer to a trivia question. <click> It’s the longest Old Testament quote found in the New Testament. <click>
4. Of course, the anti-missionaries don’t believe that Jeremiah’s prophecy has anything to do with Jesus. Their interpretation is as follows. <click> Jeremiah is saying that the Mosaic law, which Christians call the “old covenant,” will not be replaced, but it will be renewed, re-established, and re-affirmed. <click> However, in this new establishment of the same covenant, it will be written on our hearts instead of parchments of paper and tablets of stone, as the prophecy says, <click> “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” <click> Geral Sigal of Jews for Judaism wrote, “Jeremiah's ‘new covenant’ is not a replacement of the existing covenant, but merely a figure of speech expressing the reinvigoration and revitalization of the existing covenant... What Jeremiah declares is that God will establish a new covenant with Israel that unlike the old will be faithfully observed by Israel, because it will become innately part of their being.” <click> Something similar happened when Josiah was the king of Judah. <click> “And the king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people joined in the covenant.” <click> Now, the anti-missionaries aren’t saying that this was the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy. It was just an example of what a renewal of the Mosaic law looks like. The future renewal will be much better. <click>
5. The anti-missionaries argue that Jeremiah’s prophecy wasn’t fulfilled in the time of Jesus. It hasn’t even been fulfilled to this day. It’s a future Messianic prophecy. It says, <click> “‘And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord.’” <click> But Rabbi Tovia Singer said, “Are we living in a time when each and every person ‘knows the Lord’? Certainly not.” <click> There are billions of Hindus, Buddhists, and people of other religions, not to mention all the atheists, who prove that this prophecy has not yet been fulfilled. <click> The prophecy also says, “‘Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah...’” <click> But Rabbi Singer notes, “During the Christian century there was no House of Israel in existence because Assyria had exiled the Kingdom of Israel more than 700 years earlier.” <click> The northern kingdom was conquered, and the people were scattered throughout the world. Now, nobody knows where they are. They’re called the ten lost tribes. Until they are found again, this part of the prophecy cannot be fulfilled. <click> And the prophecy also says, “‘I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.’” <click> This means that people will know right from wrong instinctively, so they will have no need to learn it from the Bible. This clearly hasn’t happened yet. <click>
6. Now, the anti-missionaries say, the missionaries can’t be right, because the Mosaic covenant cannot come to an end. It’s eternal. Look at the 111th psalm: <click> “The Lord remembers his covenant forever... He has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name!” Forever. However, <click> the New Testament contradicts that. It says, “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.” <click> The author of Hebrews is simply wrong. <click>
7. As usual, the anti-missionaries point out a mistranslation in the NIV. This time it’s in verse 33. <click> The NIV version says, “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” <click> But the Hebrew word “tov-ra-tee” doesn’t mean “my law.” It means “my Torah.” <click> It’s the Mosaic covenant, not some new and different covenant. <click>
8. And, as long as we’re studying at Jeremiah 31, let’s take a look at the verse immediately preceding the prophecy. Jeremiah wrote, “But everyone shall die for his own iniquity.” This is an echo of what it says in Deuteronomy: <click> “Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.” <click> And later, Ezekiel would say basically the same thing: “... the soul who sins shall die.” What does this mean? Nobody can die to atone for another person’s sin. <click> The Christian claim that Jesus did that contradicts these verses. <click>
9. So, the anti-missionaries pointed out three things in Jeremiah’s prophecy that haven’t happened yet. The missionaries respond, <click> “Nobody ever said the entire prophecy was fulfilled in the time of Jesus. Just the part about the new covenant.”
10. So, the anti-missionaries argue that the old covenant is eternal. <click> The missionaries enthusiastically agree with that. <click> They don’t claim that Jesus *abolished* the old covenant. He *fulfilled* it. There’s a difference. <click> The old covenant must still exist, because it’s the basis of the new covenant. <click> But what about Hebrews 8:13? “In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.” Well, that cannot be saying that the old covenant will end, <click> because even Jesus asserted that the old covenant would persist forever. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.” So how do we resolve this apparent conflict? Well, this isn’t an easy one. In my research, I found several answers to that question, and I don’t think any two of them were exactly the same. I’ll show you the two that I thought were the most plausible. <click>
11. This is Steve Amato’s answer. <click> He noted that, if you read what Jesus said carefully, you’ll see that he said “until all is accomplished.” That suggests that, when all is accomplished, an iota or dot might pass from the Law. <click> And then, in the Gospel of John, we read Jesus’ last words on the cross, “After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), ‘I thirst.’ A jar full of sour wine stood there, so they put a sponge full of the sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, ‘It is finished,’ and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” <click> So, the Hebrews verse and the Matthew passage may both be true. <click>
12. Alternatively, Skip Moen tells us to look at the context of Hebrews 8:13. <click> The verses at the beginning of that chapter say, “We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law.” <click> Notice that the author of Hebrews is talking about priests and sacrifices in chapter 8. <click> Skip Moen wrote, “The context shows that he is speaking only of its system of priests and sacrifices, not its other aspects... The Temple would soon be destroyed by the Romans in 70 C.E., at which time the sacrifices would cease and the priesthood would be left without work to do... What is actually on the verge of vanishing is the old priesthood... The priesthood is the subject of the whole section... and it is this which is about to disappear.” <click> And ever since the temple was destroyed in 70 AD, there haven’t been any Jewish priests or Jewish sacrifices. So, only the parts of the old covenant that concern the priests and sacrifices vanished. <click> But the rest of the old covenant, such as the moral laws, persisted, even to this day. <click>
13. As for the claim of a mistranslation of the Hebrew word tov-ra-tee as “my law” instead of “my Torah,” the missionaries respond that <click> either translation is valid, because they’re both referring to the old covenant, the Mosaic law. The issue here is that the anti-missionaries seem to think that the missionaries claim the new covenant *replaced* the old covenant, and that’s not what they’re saying at all. <click> Jesus didn’t *replace* the old covenant. He *fulfilled* it. <click>
14. The anti-missionaries pointed out that the verse preceding the prophecy states that one man cannot die to atone for another man’s sins. Well notice that verse 30 comes before <click> verse 31, which is where the new covenant is first mentioned. Before the new covenant was initiated, it was true that nobody could die for anybody else. But after the new covenant was initiated, <click> verse 34 tells us that our sins have now been forgiven. <click> The key is to pay attention to the ordering of the verses. <click>
15. So, as always, you are free to decide who to believe, the missionaries or the anti-missionaries. <click>