

The Forgotten Covenant

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[This article is adapted from a series of BLOG posts by Dr. Henebury.¹]

Question: Which plainly stated Covenant in the Bible is most often neglected?

The answer is the covenant which the LORD made with Phinehas in the Book of Numbers.

The circumstances surrounding this covenant centers around the doctrine of Balaam as it was realized at Baal Peor (Cf. Num. 31:16; Rev. 2:14). Amid the idolatry and fornication a Simeonite by the name of Zimri openly brought a Midianite woman into the camp of Israel and took her into his tent to have sexual relations with her. This happened even while Israelites were “weeping at the door of the tabernacle of meeting.” (Num. 25:6).

Phinehas, who was Aaron’s grandson, witnessed this brazen act of “sexual liberation” and struck the man and the woman through with a javelin (Num. 25:8). This act of priestly zeal stopped a plague which had broken out within the camp which had claimed the lives of twenty-four thousand people. God’s response to this act was to initiate a “covenant of peace” with Phinehas and his descendants. This is said to be “a

covenant of an everlasting priesthood.” (25:13).

Some centuries later, the Psalmist, in recounting some of the most memorable moments of Israel’s history, referred to the incident at Baal of Peor (Psa. 106:28-31). In verses 30 and 31 it says,

Then Phinehas stood up and intervened, and the plague was stopped. And that was accounted to him for righteousness to all generations forevermore.

This covenant of peace between God and the descendants of Phinehas comes after the mention of a “covenant of salt” given to the Levites “as an ordinance forever” (Num. 18:19). The ordinance has to do with eating from the heave offerings. The exact relationship between these two covenants is not easy to pin down, although they are certainly complementary. I shall say a little more about this further on.

The descendants of Phinehas the son of Eleazar (Exod. 6:23) include Zadok, who is identified as “of the sons of Eleazar” in 1 Chronicles 24:3. During the attempted usurpation of the throne by Adonijah (1 Ki. 1:7-8), Abiathar deserted David. The aged king responded with having Abiathar removed from the priesthood, thus ensuring that Zadok’s line (the descendants of Phinehas), kept the High

¹ <http://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2014/05/12/the-forgotten-covenant-pt-1/>

Priesthood (1 Ki. 2:26-27). This becomes important when we get to Ezekiel.

The Witness of Jeremiah

Jeremiah wrote during some of the most turbulent times in Israel's history. Chapters 30 through to 34 (and even possibly 35) form a sort of thematic *scholia* on the covenants. Among the main prophetic teaching in the section is the prediction about "the time of Jacob's trouble" in Jer. 30:7 (cf. Mk. 13:19-20), a forecast about Israel serving "David their king, whom I will raise up to them" (Jer. 30:9), God's overtures of covenant steadfastness towards Israel in Jer. 31:1-4, with the LORD even calling the families of Israel "O Virgin of Israel!" in Jer. 31:4 and 21. Then there is New Covenant language in Jer. 31:11-12, which goes on to include the line,

I will satiate the soul of the priests with abundance... (Jer. 31:14a).

This comes before the famous New Covenant promise of Jer. 31:31-37. The next chapter is about Jeremiah purchasing "poor" real estate amid promises of future peace and prosperity (Jer. 32:14-15, 36-42). Next comes the great (and much neglected) thirty-third chapter. First we get a description of the tearing down of the houses to serve as fortifications against the Babylonians (Jer. 33:4-5), but it quickly turns in outlook to more prosperous times to come, including cleansing from sin (see Jer. 33:8). Then comes the passage in Jer. 33:14-26 which cites or alludes to four covenants within a New Covenant setting (This highlights my

contention that the New Covenant is needed for the [literal] fulfillment of these other covenants). Coupled with the promise to fulfill the Davidic Covenant in Jer. 33:17-18 and 21-22 are promises that God will also preserve the Levites to minister to Him. The latter passage reads,

Thus says the Yahweh: If you can break My covenant with the day and My covenant with the night [which I take as a reference to the Noahic Covenant in Genesis 8:22], so that there will not be day and night in their season, then My covenant may also be broken with David My servant, so that he will not have a son to reign on his throne, or with the Levites, the priests, My ministers. As the host of heaven cannot be numbered, nor the sand of the sea measured [a clear allusion to the Abrahamic Covenant], so will I multiply the descendants of David My servant and the Levites who minister to Me.

The type of ministry which the Levites are promised is described as offering "burnt offerings...to kindle grain offerings, and to sacrifice continually" (Jer. 33:18).

While nobody disbelieves the Davidic Covenant in Jeremiah 33, the same cannot be said for the covenant with the Levites mentioned in the same breath.

Biblical Covenantalism tracks the covenants through Scripture for the sake of putting together a composite picture of God's plan. The covenants are the backbone of Scripture. If we pay careful

attention to these covenants as they arise, we will not be able to bypass the everlasting "covenant of peace" which God made with Phinehas and his descendants in Numbers 25. The fact that a covenant of this kind is casually passed over with barely a mention and not traced out in Scripture is telling. I think what it tells is that we tend to want to read our endings to the story into passages like this. Coming to the covenants like this tends to muffle their testimony with a pious overlay of 'the finished work of Christ.'

The Witness of Ezekiel

Ezekiel, like Jeremiah, was a priest (Eze. 1:3), but evidently not in the line of Phinehas. In chapters 10 and 11 we find the vision of God's glory departing the (literal) Temple in Jerusalem. Then after many chapters filled with denunciations and the occasional promise of blessing, we arrive at chapter 34. Ezekiel 34 – 39 are tied together by the repetition of the refrain "mountains of Israel." The prophet had employed this phrase before, though sporadically (in chapters 6, 19 & 33), but now it becomes a kind of mantra, appearing eleven times in these chapters.

Examination of the uses of this refrain does not come within the scope of the present study, but I might notice the following:

1. Each usage is connected with a prophetic oracle, whereas in the first part of the book it centers on contemporary events.

2. In chapters 36, 37, and even 38 the reference is to deliverance and kingdom blessing.
3. In chapter 39 the refrain is used to locate the scene of future judgment of Israel's enemies prior to the kingdom age.

In this prophetic climactic context we read about God raising up David (Eze. 34:23-24; 37:24-25) in an Edenic environment (Eze. 34:25-27; 36:35). This recalls the promises in the Davidic Covenant which we saw in Jeremiah 33. But the Priestly Covenant is also alluded to by Ezekiel in these contexts.

First, it ought to be clear that we are driven into the future by the New Covenant language of Eze. 36:26-28. Add to this the picture of restoration in Eze. 36:34-35 and one is presented with a decision: either turn the whole context into some sort of overdone typological mirage, or take it as read and place it in the eschaton. This end-times scene is furthered with the famous prophecies of the dry bones and the two sticks in chapter 37. Right at the tail end we come across this statement:

Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed I will be their God, and they shall be My people. The nations also will know that I, the LORD, sanctify Israel,

[when My sanctuary is in their midst forevermore. \(Eze 37:26-28\).](#)

This sets the scene for what is coming in chapters 40 to 48 and the detailed blueprint for a future temple or sanctuary in Israel's New Covenant age.

The Millennial Temple and the Priestly Covenant

I take the liberty of speaking of the great temple in Ezekiel 40 and following (which is logically equated with the new sanctuary in chapter 37), as "the millennial temple."

I referred to the "covenant of salt" with the Levites in Numbers 18:19. That covenant had to do with the right of the priests to eat off the daily offerings. This covenant was within the Levitical prescriptions of the Mosaic institutions, but was everlasting and so would be expected to transcend the curtailment of the Mosaic Covenant. Hence, it is also seen under Israel's New Covenant conditions. (There is another covenant of salt in 2 Chronicles 13:5 which relates to David and his lineage. As such it is within the terms of the Davidic Covenant, if not synonymous with it). As salt does not perish the idea as related to covenant is probably of indestructibility (G. Wenham) and remaining inviolate (A. Noordtzi), although it may invoke a curse against the violator (F.C. Fensham). Unsurprisingly then, in Ezekiel's future temple administration the priests are given the offerings as food, just as the covenant of salt would demand (Eze. 44:29-31).

Just consider these ten lines of evidence (extracted from a previous post) for the actuality of a future 'Millennial' Temple:

1. Ezekiel calls it a temple over and over,

E.g. Eze. 40:5, 45 – where the priestly function is mentioned; Eze. 41:6-10 – where its chambers are described in pedantic detail; Eze. 42:8 – where the length of the chambers depends on their position relative to the sanctuary; Eze. 43:11 – where God declares:

[make known to them the design of the house, its structure, its exits, its entrances, all its designs, all its statutes, and all its laws. And write it in their sight, so that they may observe its whole design and all its statutes, and do them.](#)

Then, in regards priestly functions within the structure: in Eze. 43:21 a bull is to be offered as a sin-offering outside the house; Eze. 45:20 – an atonement is made for the simple on the seventh day of the month; Eze. 46:24 – sacrifices are boiled at designated places; Eze. 48:21 – the huge allotment for the sanctuary is measured (it is *very* different to New Jerusalem in Rev. 21!).

2. It has laws to perform (Eze. 43:11-12).
3. It stipulates two divisions of priests, only one of whom

(Zadokites) can approach the Lord (Eze. 44:15), and who are given land separate from other Levites (Eze. 48:11).

4. It refers to New Moons and sacrifices (Eze. 46:1, 6).
5. The tribes of Israel are given specific allotments of land all around the temple (ch. 48)
6. The two temples at the beginning and the end of the Book of Ezekiel form a structural arc. The first one is literal. Nothing is said about the more detailed one being a mere symbol. In fact, in 8:3ff. "the visions of God" recorded what really did occur (cf. Eze. 40:2).
7. In ch. 10 the *Shekinah* leaves the actual temple in Jerusalem by the East Gate. In ch. 43 it returns via the East Gate and remains.
8. A sanctuary is mentioned in the new covenant chapters (Eze. 36 & 37).

For example, after Israel has been cleansed, God declares:

I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. (Eze. 37:26. Cf. 43:7).

This indicates the timing of the fulfillment of the temple prophecy. This agrees with the

timing indicated in the last verse of Ezekiel:

the name of the city from *that day shall be*, 'The LORD is there' (Eze. 48:35)

9. At least three times Ezekiel is commanded to pay close attention to specifics: Eze. 40:4; 43:10-11; 44:5.
10. A future temple is necessary in light of God's everlasting covenant with the Zadokites' ancestor Phinehas (Num. 25:10-13; Psa. 106:30-31. Cf. Jer. 33:14f., Mal. 3:1-4).

The symbolic interpretation ignores these details when seeking to explain the meaning of the vision. It also ignores the 'Edenic' character of the temple environment. For example, Chapter 36:35 says,

So they will say, 'This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden... (see also Eze. 36: 29-30).

Regarding the depiction of the temple in Eze. 37:26 Williamson observes, "While there is no explicit mention of nature here, the concept of God's sanctuary in their midst reminds the alert reader of the idyllic portrayal of harmony portrayed in Eden." – Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 66-67.

This matches the New Covenant reference to kingdom fecundity in Eze. 34:25-27,

I will make a covenant of peace with them, and cause wild beasts to

cease from the land; and they will dwell safely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. I will make them and the places all around My hill a blessing; and I will cause showers to come down in their season; there shall be showers of blessing. Then the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield her increase. They shall be safe in the land; and they shall know that I am the LORD... I shall raise up for them a garden of renown, and they shall no longer be consumed with hunger in the land...

Certainly, the waters which flow out from the Temple have mercurial powers to change the land and restore it (Eze. 47:6-12). It is in this habitat that the new Levitical order lives and officiates (Eze. 48:10-14).

One cannot confine all these statements within the old (Mosaic) covenant and wish them away. As everyone knows who studies Ezekiel's temple, there are some marked differences between Mosaic stipulations and requirements and those found at the end of Ezekiel. They are not the same. In addition to the division of priests into first order Zadokites and second order Levites, there is no High Priest. Moreover, there is no celebration of Pentecost or the Day of Atonement.

This all points to future circumstances in which the Levites play a major part. This is precisely what one would be led to expect after reading the oath God made to Phinehas.

After the vision of the enormous temple which ends Ezekiel one is left with some questions. How could such an immense structure fit in Jerusalem as we know it? Why would any cultic priesthood be necessary once Jesus had come and died for our sins? And, doesn't the Book of Hebrews negate the whole idea of priests and sacrifices?

I am going to leave aside the last two questions until I examine some objections later. But here I will answer the first problem. But before I do that I want to fill in the picture a little more by looking at some more prophetic references.

In Daniel's prayer of confession in Daniel 9 we see him specifically make supplications for "Your city Jerusalem" (Dan. 9:16) and "Your sanctuary" (Dan. 9:17). Gabriel's answer addresses Jerusalem (Dan. 9:24, 25) and the temple, which is doomed to destruction (Dan. 9:26). I am not concerned with the identity of the sanctuary in verse 26 (other than to say that, in my opinion, it is not Herod's temple). My interest is in whether Gabriel has any positive answer regarding God's temple. I believe he does.

In the list of six eschatological details which must be fulfilled after the seventy weeks (490 years) prophecy in verse 24, the sixth concerns the anointing of "the Most Holy" (this particular Hebrew term always designates a devoted thing or place in its other OT uses, never a person, as even some amillennial scholars are forced to admit). Unless one spiritualizes the other five items and makes the sixth mean something different than its previous uses

in the OT, this passage refers to a future temple which will stand when transgression is *finished*; when everlasting righteousness has been *brought in*, and all vision and prophecy has been sealed up. Since none of these things happened at the first coming of Christ anyway (even prophets were functioning many years after Calvary), and since the anointing of the "Most Holy [Place]" is the last on the list, it makes more sense to put the fulfillment of this verse after the second coming. This fits hand in glove with the provisions of the Priestly Covenant, with Jeremiah 33, and with the predictions in the last part of Ezekiel.

In Joel 3:17-21 we find ingredients which remind us of the kinds of eschatological blessings God promised to Israel. Jerusalem will be "holy" (Joel 3:17), there will be blessings in production and general fecundity (Joel 3:18). And, lo and behold, "A fountain shall flow from the house of the LORD (which means a temple, just as we saw happening in Eze. 47:6ff.).

This picture is further enhanced by the prophet Zechariah after the Exile. For instance, in chapter 1:16-17 the message of the comforting of Zion and of the Lord's own return to his house were hardly fulfilled from 500 B.C. through A.D. 70. The Lord did not return to the Zerubbabel/Herod temple at all! Yet in Zec. 2:10 we read,

Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion! For behold, I am coming and I will dwell in your midst...

In the sixth chapter we have a prophecy of the Branch who, as is stated with great emphasis, will build the temple. (Zec. 6:12-13a). This man will also "bear the glory" and, as a priest-king (combining both offices in Himself), "will sit on His throne." (Zec. 6:13b).

This Messianic prophecy has Christ sitting as King. He is a temple-builder! Is this heaven and a spiritual throne and temple? Only if you are an amillennialist bent on ignoring the Priestly Covenant and its promises. Chapter Zec. 8:3 again has God returning to Jerusalem, which shall be called "the City of Truth". This is hardly an accurate description of Jerusalem in the first century A.D.

In Zechariah 13:2-3, after a New Covenant prediction of cleansing for Israel, there is an intriguing passage about a young man who attempts to act the prophet and who gets thrust through by his own parents for doing so. I take this to apply to the time after Christ has come back in power, when certainly there will be no need of prophets. I relate it to Gabriel's fifth prediction in Daniel 9:4 about the sealing up of "the vision and prophecy." Then in chapter 14 we find the LORD coming with His saints (Zec. 14:5c), ruling as "King over all the earth" (Zec. 14:9), and then a passage which has the nations coming up to Jerusalem to "worship the King" who is explicitly called "the LORD of hosts" (Zec. 14:16-17). The "LORD's house" and "sacrifices" are mentioned clearly in Zec. 14:20-21. The eschatological context includes radical topographical changes which will completely alter Jerusalem –

thereby very possibly making room for Ezekiel's massive temple to be built (Zec. 14:4-5).

Finally the last prophet in the OT, Malachi, has God directly speaking of "My covenant with Levi" which He wants to "continue" (Mal. 2:4). In the next chapter, in a context reminding one of the second coming (cf. Rev. 21:11f.), we read about God purifying "the sons of Levi" (Mal. 3:3) that they "may offer to the LORD an offering in righteousness," (and you need to have a temple to offer such sacrifices). So the very last Old Testament prophet still appears to think that there is a future function for priests in a temple. Did this occur in Jesus' day? When have Levites been purified? The only question then is whether one is going to remember the covenant terms in Num. 25, Jer. 33, etc, and stick with them, or whether one is going to turn it magically into "Jesus and the Church" using typological and symbolic alchemy.

As for me, more than enough evidence has been presented to put forward a solid case for an incontrovertible and everlasting Priestly Covenant.

Objections

In this last section of our study of the "Priestly Covenant" I will try to answer some of the main objections which might be thrown at what I have already stated.

1. If Christ is the Final Sacrifice for sins, how can there be a temple and sacrifices in the future?

This objection is based on a misunderstanding of the Book of Hebrews. Mixed in with this is a subtle prejudice (usually of the non-pejorative sort) against the very idea of a temple and sacrifices. I shall address the former issue more than the latter.

In Hebrews 7:12 the priesthood is said to be changed. That being so, how can Levites officiate in any future temple? The answer, of course, is that it is the High Priesthood which is under consideration in Hebrews (Cf. Heb. 4:14-5:5; 7:1-3, 11-13,23-27; 9:6-10, etc). Interestingly, there is no High Priest mentioned in Ezekiel 40-48; nor is there any Day of Atonement (of which the writer of Hebrews makes so much). This is because Jesus combines both roles in himself (see Zech. 6:12-13). As Jesus now officiates in the heavenly tabernacle (according to Heb. 8:2 & 9:24), when He returns it ought not surprise anyone that, having left a (surely) stupendous temple in glory He should enter a magnificent one on earth!

Hebrews 9:9 and 10:2 make it clear that all the gifts and offerings of the temple could not (and so cannot in any future scenario) cleanse the conscience. It is Christ's own sacrifice which does cleanse the conscience (Heb. 9:12-14), and clears the way for the blessings of the New Covenant (Heb. 9:15). It is also plain from 10:2 that in order for the sacrifices of the OT to continue, there had to be a "consciousness of sins". It is this

consciousness which “the blood of bulls and goats” could deal with. Neither could they finally expiate sins (Heb. 10:4). Hence, Christ once-for-all offering is the only satisfaction for that task – it is the only propitiation (10:10-14).

Please notice that according to the writer of Hebrews the sacrifices and offerings of the Old Testament did *not* avail to “take away sins” (Heb. 10:11). So then, what was the point of them? Well, they *were* “sacrifices for sins” (Heb. 5:1, 3; 7:27). But they were not potent enough to cleanse the conscience and to provide “redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant” (Heb. 9:15).

My question in regards to future sacrifices becomes, “how can future sacrifices and temple ministrations be disallowed if they won’t do the work which Christ alone could and did do?” My answer is they cannot; not on *that* particular basis.

Added to this is the fact that, as I have said, Hebrews really concerns the High Priest, and there is no High Priest (of the Levitical sort) in Ezekiel’s [Millennial] Temple.

The question of the actual role of Millennial sacrifices is not my concern here; only whether temple sacrifices are obviated by anything said in the Book of Hebrews. But certain passages which I take as referring to the future kingdom age speak of children and sinners and foreigners journeying to Jerusalem (see e.g. Isa. 65:18-23; Zech. 8:3-8; 14:16-20). Will these people need to sacrifice as a mark of their inner acceptance of Christ’s work on the Cross? I think it not improbable. But

again, my task here is not to explain future sacrifices, only to show that they are nowhere negated. (For more, see *Ezekiel’s Temple: Premillennial Achilles’ Heel?*²).

2. If there is a temple and sacrifices in the Millennium, how can there be any such things in the New Heavens and Earth?

To put the question another way, if the Priestly Covenant is eternal, as it appears to be, how can there be a temple with sacrifices in the New Creation?

If we allow that a case for millennial sacrifices is not defeated by anything in the New Testament, particularly the Book of Hebrews, what about in the New Heavens and New Earth? Here two issues present themselves:

First and foremost is Revelation 21:22, which in the midst of describing New Jerusalem reads:

But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

One of the main uses of a temple was to create a “sacred-space” within which God and man could meet. In this context there is “no more curse” (Rev. 22:3), so everywhere is a sacred space. The Divine Presence pervades it, so there is no need of a temple as such. However, it needs to be noted that the glorious city itself is

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<http://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2008/05/09/ezekiel%E2%80%99s-temple-premillennial-achilles%E2%80%99-heal/>

shaped like one enormous Holy of Holies (Rev. 21:15-16). It is a Great Cube.

Still, there is no mention of sacrifices in it. True, and it would be wrong to force an implication upon the text to help me along. Still, the New Jerusalem is not the entirety of the New Heavens and Earth. Revelation 21:24-26 state,

And the nations of those that are saved shall walk in its [New Jerusalem's] light, and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory and honor into it. Its gates shall not be shut at all (there shall be no night there). And they shall bring the glory and honor of the nations into it.

There will be nations dwelling on earth who, though they will have access to the New Jerusalem, are not occupants of its streets of gold. Twice we are told that they make "pilgrimages" there to bring their glory and honor into the city. But nothing is really said about what is happening on earth. This leaves upon the possibility (which in view of the Priestly Covenant is more than a possibility), that a temple and sacrifices will be still on earth in eternity. I see nothing to contradict this, although I confess that it may not sit easily with many people.

This, of course, is the substance of the second issue. And all I can do is to point out that God made an everlasting covenant with Phinehas. I am not attempting to explain all difficulties in this post. I am simply trying to show that

nothing prevents the Priestly Covenant being sustained eternally.

3. Isn't the covenant with the Levites connected to the Mosaic covenant which is temporary?

My final question can be answered easily enough. First by pointing out that if the covenant with Phinehas is bounded by the temporary Mosaic Covenant then it is a rather pointless covenant; for it would come about anyhow, without any requirement for God to enter into a covenant oath. God could simply prophesy it like He did in other specific cases.

More than this, we have already noted that there are some important differences between the Solomonic Temple and ministrations and Ezekiel's Temple and ministrations. They are not exactly the same, and this caused the Jews to try to harmonize the conflicting details. But if Ezekiel's Temple is a New Covenant Temple with Christ as its Melchizedekian High Priest, Who reconciles the throne and the priesthood in Himself (Zech. 6:12-13), then the differences present no problem and the Priestly Covenant transcends the Mosaic Covenant, exactly as the Davidic Covenant, which was made under the Mosaic constitution, is not circumscribed by it.

This then is the Forgotten Covenant. I hope this article has helped shed some light upon it.



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