

A Priest of a Higher Law

11 Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need *was there* that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron? 12 For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law. 13 For He of whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no man has officiated at the altar. 14 For *it is* evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood. 15 And it is yet far more evident if, in the likeness of Melchizedek, there arises another priest 16 who has come, not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an endless life. 17 For He testifies: "You *are* a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek." 18 For on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness, 19 for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, *there is the* bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God. 20 And inasmuch as *He was not made priest* without an oath 21 (for they have become priests without an oath, but He with an oath by Him who said to Him: "The LORD has sworn And will not relent, 'You *are* a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek '"), 22 by so much more Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant. (Heb. 7:11-22)

For some reason, the desire to be under the Law of Moses is something that never seems to permanently leave the church. It doesn't matter the year, the country, or the circumstance, but someone, somewhere is teaching Christians that they must keep the Law of Moses.

Of course, it is always a selective keeping of the Law of Moses. The most popular are to avoid the foods forbidden in the Law: pork and shellfish, and certain other animals. There are usually those still convinced that the Jewish sabbath ought to still be the Christian day of worship, telling us that we must worship on Saturdays, or in the case of the strictly Reformed, that Sunday is the Sabbath. We hear from some that male children must be circumcised.

But almost never do we hear people making sure that their clothes are not made of mixed wool and linen, secluding themselves if they develop a skin infection with a white hair growing out of it. I have never heard of Christian women having given birth to a boy secluding themselves for forty days, and if they give birth to a girl, for eighty days. No Christian I know ever demolished his house because of persistent red and green mould on the walls, refused to eat fat in the meat, wore tassels on his clothes, or took a one-year sabbatical every seven years. No Christian I know forbids attendance at corporate worship because of recent bodily emissions. Few Christian men believe they are required to grow a beard, and forbidden to cut its edges.

My point is that Christian legalism, in the true sense of the term, Christian law-keeping, is highly selective. It isolates and chooses a few laws out of the mass, and believes it can ignore or omit the rest. By the way, there are not 613 Laws in the Law of Moses, that is a number developed by rabbis, mostly by Maimonides, so as to have exactly 365 negative commands, one for each day of the year, and 248 positive commandments, one for each bone of your body. The true number is probably closer to around 270.

But even so, nowhere in Scripture do we ever get the notion that we will be able to keep some of the 270 and not all, or that it can be divided into thirds: a ceremonial law, a civil law and a moral law. On the contrary, James tells us in his epistle For whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking it all (Jas. 2:10). Paul similarly says And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. (Gal. 5:3)

Christian law-keeping comes about from a variety of motives. Some people come from backgrounds in Seventh-Day Adventism, or Theonomy, or even Messianic Judaism, and find it hard to shake. Others are worried that they are omitting duties to God that occupy the first five books of the Bible. And some feel that there is so much lawlessness in Christianity today, so much permissive living supposedly being "under grace", that they feel we need to re-emphasise Law so as

to re-calibrate the whole thing.

But it almost always ends in shipwreck. What begins as one quirk in the diet, often becomes an all-consuming idolatry with clean and unclean foods. What begins as submitting to some of the laws of Moses becomes a fascination with Messianic Judaism, and then Judaism proper, and before we know it, there is an abandonment of Christianity. What begins as deciding that Saturday is Sabbath becomes calling Lord's Day worship a pagan day of Constantine, or in the words of Ellen G. White, the Mark of the Beast itself.

Paul was exercised enough by this trend to write the entire book of Galatians. And the writer of Hebrews is equally exercised by this tendency to want to always return to the shelter of Moses. That's why one of the key words of this book is the word "better". Believing Jews and Gentiles now have a better covenant than that of Moses, a better hope, a better law. He wants to show us that here in Hebrews 7:11-22.

The way He does that is part of His argument that Jesus is the final and ultimate Priest. What he is going to do is contrast the priests under the Law of Moses with the priesthood of Jesus. His conclusion is that Jesus is the High Priest of a better covenant, a better hope, a higher law, through which we draw near to God.

And the choice is laid before us once again: do we wish to draw back to the old, or do we wish to draw near to God through the new?

The writer expects you and me to be very reasonable people. He appeals both to our biblical knowledge and to our logic. He gives you three reasons why the coming of Jesus means we are under a new law. Three reasons why we can now draw near to God through a better covenant.

I. A New Priesthood Means a New Law

11 Therefore, if perfection were through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need *was there* that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron? (Heb. 7:11)

The priestly system of Israel was contained within the Law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. There, the Levites are the priests, and the High Priest is a Levite from the family of Aaron. Chapter and chapters are filled with the offerings and sacrifices and rituals to be performed by the priests. Chapters and chapters on who the priests were to be, and how they were to be appointed, dressed, prepared.

Here's the logical problem: If that system was sufficient to deal properly and finally with man's sin, if it could bring a worshipper into the Holy of Holies and enable you to draw near to God, why would God have mentioned a second priesthood? It is centuries later, 500 years after Moses, as the Levites are fully functioning, when David writes Psalm 110. Only then the Holy Spirit through David prophesies the coming of a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. The writer says to us, logically, the only reason why a second priesthood would be needed was if the first one couldn't achieve what was needed.

The word here for another priest is not the Greek word for another of the same kind. It is the word for a different kind altogether: *heteros*. A new priest altogether.

Then he takes us on another logical step.

12 For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law. 13 For He of whom

these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no man has officiated at the altar. 14 For *it is* evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood. (Heb. 7:12-14)

Once there is a new priesthood (because the old one was inferior), it must mean that the Law governing priests has changed. In the Law of Moses, only Levites could be priests. In fact, when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon, Ezra 2:62 records that some who had lost their genealogical records were excluded from the priesthood.

Jesus, this Melchizedekian High Priest is from Judah. Apparently everyone even by the time Hebrews is written, knew the genealogy of Jesus. He is descended from David through Mary. Both Mary and Joseph were from the tribe of Judah. And in the Law of Moses, there is nothing whatsoever to say that a man from Judah can be a priest of any sort.

So if the Law of Moses is still the standing Law governing priests, and Jesus claims priesthood, then Jesus is a Lawbreaker. Jesus is a trespasser into the priesthood. We remember what happened when a man from the tribe of Judah tried to act like a priest: King Uzziah took it upon himself to offer incense in the Temple. The priests rebuked him, saying "*It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Get out of the sanctuary, for you have trespassed! You shall have no honor from the LORD God.*" (2 Chr. 26:18) Uzziah did not listen, and God disciplined him with leprosy for the rest of his days.

So if the Law of Moses is still the Law that governs us, Jesus cannot be the High Priest. Imagine our president announcing that he is now the King of South Africa. He could not do that, because our standing law, our constitution makes no provision for kings. If he did so, he would actually be breaking the highest law of the land, and would be fit to be impeached from office. If he wanted to become King of South Africa, he would have to change the constitution, with all the two-thirds majority he would need, and win all the lawsuits that would be raised against him in the Constitutional Court. Only having changed the Law itself, could he then become King of South Africa.

Logical conclusion: the law of Moses is no longer in effect. A new priest means a new law. Jesus is the lawfully chosen new high priest, which means the entire Law of Moses is no longer the law of the day. A new priest means a new law. But from the first evident reason that we are not under the Law of Moses, he now gives a second evident reason.

II. An Immortal Priesthood Means an Irreplaceable Law

15 And it is yet far more evident if, in the likeness of Melchizedek, there arises another priest 16 who has come, not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an endless life. 17 For He testifies: "*You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek.*" (Heb. 7:15-17)

Here is his next proof. If it is evident that we have a new law if we have new priest, it is even more evident that if the new priest lives forever, then his law will last forever.

Verse 17 is his proof. He quotes Psalm 110:4, and his emphasis is on the word *forever*. You are a priest *forever* according to the order of Melchizedek. Now if Jesus will be a priest not just for now, or for a moment, but forever, then His priesthood is permanent, and eternal. Consequently, whatever law or covenant He operates in lasts as long as He does! His law is irreplaceable.

Verse 15 shows us something very interesting. It says another priest arises. This verb is in the middle voice. What that means is in some cases, it means the person doing the action is doing it to himself, or for himself. The idea is that Jesus arises as a priest not by some Law greater than

himself. It means that He rises by his own authority.

The word arises also gives us a clue as to when He became High Priest. This is the same word resurrection.

Now that stands in contrast to the Levites who were mortal men. They would die, and have to be replaced. 23 Also there were many priests, because they were prevented by death from continuing. (Heb. 7:23)

They would have to repeat sacrifices every year. All of this shows that their priesthood was, according to verse 16, according to the law of a fleshly commandment. There the word *fleshly* doesn't mean evil or worldly. It means outward, temporal, earthly. There were 142 physical blemishes that could disqualify a Levitical priest. Their priesthood was a stop-gap, provision. This continual repetition and replacement seemed to say, this is not permanent. This law is provisional, and partial. This depends on mortal men who die.

It's rather like how the software companies keep the sheep coming back to the feeding trough by issuing updates. You can't stick with OS 10.13, you need OS 10.14. Still using iPhone X? You need iPhone X-Plus? Playstation 4. Your old games won't work unless you get Playstation 5. Update, update – your software, your car, your phone. There's no security, you're only as good as the trend lasts and as the manufacturer makes money. But if you had a perfect phone, or a perfect car, there would never need to be an update. It would be irreplaceable.

But once you have a priest who rises from the dead, who rises by His own power, who is now an immortal priest, who will be in that office forever, what does that say about his law? Turn to Hebrews 13, and you will see how the writer views this new law, this new covenant:

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant (Heb. 13:20)

An everlasting covenant. This is the language God uses when prophesying of the institution of the new covenant in Ezekiel: "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 forevermore. (Ezek. 37:26)

This law is now the final covenant. Nothing needs to be added to this law. Jesus is not going to be replaced by someone else. There isn't some other covenant even better than this one, still to come. No, the forever-priest now means a forever covenant.

A new priest means a new law. An immortal priest means an irreplaceable law.

III. A Sworn-In Priest Means a Secure Law

20 And inasmuch as *He* was not *made* priest without an oath 21 (for they have become priests without an oath, but He with an oath by Him who said to Him: "The LORD has sworn And will not relent, 'You *are* a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek' "), 22 by so much more Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant. (Heb. 7:20-22)

In the Law of Moses, priests were not made priests by a sworn oath from God. They simply became priests by the existing regulations in the Law of Moses. Whatever was written there was how they became priests: be born of Levi, be over twenty, but under fifty, serve in various groups and in different ways, wear certain things. But it was all simply following the fine print of the Mosaic Law. It was indirect, and it was impersonal. What that means is, if you change that Law, you change them. Their status was as provisional as the law that appointed them.

We all know from our experience of modern law how lawyers can interpret laws creatively. Someone sues you and finds some omission, some fine print that they can exploit. The Law has a built-in kind of instability because it is dealing with weak people, attempting to legislate for every situation.

In fact, in Jesus's day, that's exactly what you had: 46 And He said, "Woe to you also, lawyers! For you load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers. (Lk. 11:46)

But if we go from printed law to personal promise, we are moving from inferior to superior. On the other hand, if a priest is made a priest by a direct oath and promise of God, that is the highest form of authority. So here he quotes Psalm 110:4 again, but this time the emphasis is not on the word *forever*, this time the emphasis is on the words "*sworn and will not relent*".

but He with an oath by Him who said to Him: "The LORD has sworn And will not relent, 'You *are* a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek

The Law of Moses like a printed law contract that can be revised and updated. But an oath from God is like when that ruler arrives for a live appearance and makes a declaration.

What is the result? Verse 22.

Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant. (Heb. 7:11-22) Literally, Jesus has become guarantor of a better covenant. Surety means that He makes a pledge, a deposit, a down-payment to guarantee that everything this new covenant promises us, will come to pass.

This new law is not mounds and mounds of legal fine-print, where you never know the outcome of your case. The new law is that your case depends on one Man, and that one Man has been appointed directly by God.

Three reasons why if Jesus is the High Priest, then the Law of Moses is over: a new priest means a new law, an immortal priest means an irreplaceable law, and a sworn-in priest means a secure law.

All of this is summarised for us in verse 18 and 19.

18 For on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness, 19 for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, *there is the* bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God. (Heb. 7:18-19)

The former commandment, which means the previous, the earlier covenant – the Law of Moses is annulled. This was a technical legal term which meant cancelled. A contract that was in force is now annulled, abolished, set aside. The Law of Moses has the word cancelled stamped over it as the binding and standing agreement between God and His people. Why? It was weak and unprofitable. It could not bring about the goal, the desired end of true atonement and ushering people into the presence of God. The Law could only reveal righteousness, and regulate life, and partially cover sins. But it was old, partial, temporary, and insecure.

But it was a tutor, a guide, a map, meant to push us to Messiah.

Verse 19 tells us what He does. With Him, there is the ushering in, the introduction of a better hope. It is new, it is better, it is irreplaceable, it is secure, and most of all, it brings us into the presence of God.

So when did this happen? I believe I can show the exact moment.

44 Now it was about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over all the earth until the ninth hour. 45 Then the sun was darkened, and the veil of the temple was torn in two. 46 And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." Having said this, He breathed His last. (Lk. 23:44-46)

For three hours, the sun is darkened, and the Son of God becomes the atonement for the sins of the world. Every single Old Testament sacrifice was pointing forwards to those three hours. Every Day of Atonement, around 1480 of them pointed to those three hours. On each of those, the High Priest had gone past the veil into the Holy of Holies, taken the blood of the killed goat, and sprinkled it on the Mercy seat on the Ark, obtaining one year's atonement for Israel. As long as that veil remained, it meant the Holy of Holies was not accessible to men, and the partial, temporary Law of Moses needed to keep functioning until the day of fulfillment.

But this was that moment. And as Jesus atoned for our sins, and then offered up His perfect life, God tore the veil from top to bottom. Because now it was clear that the Melchizidekian Messiah would usher people into the Most Holy by His own blood.

If God wanted to say that the old commandment was annulled, that the contract had been torn in two, that the former Mosaic barriers had now been abolished, that the entire Temple system was now pointless, needless, redundant, what more could He have done? What more physical, public, simple, symbolic, unambiguous, obvious method could He have used to say the Mosaic Law was over than the rip open the access to the one that the entire Law fenced off and kept people out of: God's Holy Presence.

As the priests came into that Temple, and saw that sagging curtain in two pieces, with the Mercy Seat in full view, and knew that no human hands had ripped that curtain, they had to know, something has changed forever.

Now why is it, that what God has torn asunder, some Christians wish to join together? There they sit, stitching the veil back together again, trying to restore the food laws, restore the sabbaths, restore the ritual purity laws, trying to rebuild the wall of partition between Jew and Gentile, trying to resurrect dead Judaism, trying to get God to remove Himself again to impersonal Sinai?

Our Messiah died to rip that veil apart, so that we could draw near to God, not be kept back through multiple fences of Mosaic laws. Why would we seek the yoke that Israel itself was not able to bear? Paul commands us Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free¹, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. (Gal. 5:1)

So what is the new law that He ushered in? Read the Sermon on the Mount. There He tells you, "You heard it said under Moses, but I say unto you." Jesus shows you in the Sermon on the Mount, and in His teaching in the Gospels, and through the writings of His appointed apostles, the law of the new covenant. It is a higher standard actually. It is inward righteousness. It is Spirit-empowered righteousness. It is spiritual reality. It is communion with God. It is the righteousness that He will expect and enforce in His kingdom on the Earth.

But that's why Moses and Elijah stood next to Him on the Mount of Transfiguration, so as to say, the Law and the Prophets now point to Messiah. He is the fulfillment. Don't look to us for your righteousness, we are looking to Him.

What a privilege to live under the new covenant! May we never rebuild what God has removed. May we never draw back when God now calls us to draw near. May we glorify the final High Priest by being fixed on Him alone.