

The Case for Torah

A Study of the Book of Hebrews

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Hebrews Introduction

Our task over the past many years has been to examine each of the New Testament passages used to show the Old Testament law has been abolished. While each passage has required much thought, time, and energy, the book of Hebrews tops them all. Hebrews is one of the most complex and controversial New Testament books. It is full of rich theology and truth, and yet is so easily misinterpreted and misapplied. We therefore approach the writing of this chapter with humility, sincerity, and prayer.

Traditionally, Christians have understood Hebrews to be a declaration of the end of the Old Testament ceremonial laws. Under this view, the writer of Hebrews believed that God cancelled the old covenant through the superior work of Christ on the cross. Specifically, the animal sacrifices performed by the Levitical priests have been fulfilled and therefore done away with through the efficacious sacrifice of Christ for us. T.R. Schreiner agrees when he writes,

OT sacrifices and priests played a proper role in their era, pointing to the fulfillment that would be enacted when the true priest and sacrifice arrived. Now that the fulfillment of the old covenant has arrived returning to the old way deserves judgment (647).

Hebrews scholar William L. Lane likewise states,

The fact that the old sacrifices had been superseded by the unique offering of Christ implied that the old covenant is indeed obsolete (8:13) and has been replaced by the promised new covenantal arrangement (*Hebrews 9–13*, 268).

We must carefully consider whether this traditional explanation is accurate. Did the writer of Hebrews demonstrate that the old covenant is obsolete? Is there a continuing role for the Levitical priesthood and the animal sacrifices? Is this understanding consistent with the whole of Scripture? In this chapter, we will examine these questions and more.

Background Information

Who wrote Hebrews?

Many speculate as to who wrote the book of Hebrews, since no author is named in the letter. In his commentary on the book of Hebrews, Paul Ellingworth lists thirteen historical suggestions for authorship, to include the apostle Paul, Luke, and Barnabas (3). Historically, many have suggested the apostle Paul to be the author, though “... the idea of Pauline authorship of Hebrews is now almost universally abandoned” (ibid, 3). Ellingworth goes on to list several differences between known Pauline literature and the Epistle to the Hebrews, including significant differences in vocabulary, as well as a focus on different themes and issues (ibid, 3-11).

What then can we know about the author of Hebrews? Church Father Origen, who lived from 185 to 254 AD, maintained that while the author of Hebrews was likely not Paul, he was familiar with Paul and probably knew him well (Cockerill, 5). This is affirmed at the end of the epistle, where we see that the author knew Timothy and thus likely knew Paul (Hebrews 13:23). In his commentary on Hebrews, Gareth Lee Cockerill points out,

[The author] was a master of elegant Greek who understood the principles of rhetoric and oral persuasion as taught in the ancient world. He had a thorough knowledge of the OT and a clear understanding of how it should be interpreted in light of its fulfillment in Christ (2).

Again and again, the author shows his thorough and developed knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures as he cites passage after passage to make his case.

We can also know that the author most likely did not receive direct revelation of the gospel from Jesus Christ, but rather, the gospel message was passed on through witnesses: “and [salvation] was attested to us by those who heard” (Hebrews 2:3). This reaffirms the idea that Paul was not the author since he received revelation of the gospel directly from Christ (Galatians 1:12).

In summary, while we do not know who the author of Hebrews is, we can say with fair certainty that he was (1) not Paul yet knew Paul, (2) was well versed in the Old Testament, and (3) affirmed the authority of the Old Testament.

Audience, Date, and Purpose

The audience is not specifically mentioned in Hebrews. Nevertheless, we can make a few observations about the original recipients. First, they were well versed in the Old Testament. Ellingworth notes,

In Hebrews, the evidence is overwhelming that the author expected his readers to be thoroughly acquainted with OT persons, institutions (especially cultic institutions, e.g., 9:1–10), and texts, and with the Mosaic law, and to accept unquestioningly the divine authority of the OT (23).

Therefore, we can confidently assume a Jewish background.

Second, they were likely connected to the Pauline circle, as evidenced by the mention of Timothy in 13:22-25. Third, the audience was familiar with those living outside of Israel. In 13:24, those in Italy send their greetings. Where exactly the original audience lived is unknown, other than they did not live in Italy themselves.

Also unclear is the date of the epistle. Most suggested dates tend to pivot around AD 70, when the temple was destroyed. However, some place the writing before the fall of the temple and others after its destruction (Cockerill, 35).

Much is unknown in this letter – who wrote it, to whom it was written, and when it was written. What we can identify more confidently is the purpose of the letter. Throughout Hebrews, the author warns his audience against falling away from the Messiah. Apparently, many were turning away from Jesus and relying on the Jewish temple rites and animal sacrifices as being sufficient for atonement of sins. In the first several chapters, the author of Hebrews establishes the supremacy of Christ over all other things. He then gives repeated and severe warnings to those who would reject Jesus after accepting him. Here are just a few verses in chapters two through four that give these warnings.

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it (2:1).

And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope (3:6).

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end (3:12-14).

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it (4:1).

Throughout all the rich theology of Hebrews, we see the author’s heart to keep believers steadfast in their striving toward eternity and not to turn away to anything else. All things pale in comparison with the surpassing greatness of the Messiah.

The “Already-Not Yet” Tension in Hebrews

As we read and study Hebrews, we are faced with an ongoing tension between the promises we experience to some degree at present and the full application of these promises in the future, commonly referred to as the “already” and the “not yet.” New Testament Theologian George Eldon Ladd explains that “... the Kingdom of God involves two great moments: fulfillment within history, and consummation at the end of history” (90). The fulfillment represents the “already;” the “consummation, the “not yet.” Ladd stresses that this tension exists in numerous places throughout the book of Hebrews (622).

Hebrews chapter eleven provides a clear example. The author lists several people who lived by faith in future promises, acting during the present on their sure hope of the future.

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth (11:13).

Abraham, for example, received the promises of an inheritance in the land and offspring as numerous as the stars in heaven, but he did not personally experience the fullness of these promises in his lifetime; he only saw them from afar, yet acted on the surety of the promises.

Other parts of Scripture demonstrate this same tension. Paul, in Romans, describes the personal struggle all believers have with sin at present (7:18-20), and yet he calls us more than conquerors through Christ Jesus (8:37). We struggle, yet we have conquered. We are dying, yet we are alive. We suffer and groan, yet our eyes are on the surpassing glory that awaits us (8:19). Paul can state all of this in faith, for he is sure that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (8:38-39).

The writer of Hebrews understood what it meant to walk in faith – to live out in the present what has not yet been fully realized, to be so sure of what is to come that we claim its truth in the here and now, to experience already through faith what has not yet come. We must keep this idea at the forefront of our minds as we study Hebrews.

The Superiority of Christ

We will focus our study primarily on Hebrews chapters seven through ten. In the chapters leading up to this, the author argues for the superiority of Christ over all things. He begins with a bang, stating that Jesus is the Son, the heir of all things, and the Creator of the world (1:2). He is the exact imprint of the Father, and he upholds the entire universe by the word of his power (1:3).

The author continues by comparing Jesus (the Creator) with various created beings. In chapters one and two, Jesus is superior to the angels. In 3:1-6, he is superior to Moses. Finally, beginning in chapter four, the author makes his case that Jesus is superior to the Levitical priesthood, and this argument carries into chapter seven, which will begin the heart of our study. The author sees the danger of his audience turning from the Messiah and therefore from their salvation, so he begins the book with his insistence that Jesus is supreme. There is nothing better to turn to.

Hebrews Chapter 4

Entering God's Rest

In chapter three, the author has just written about the wilderness generation, who had hard hearts and did not enter the promised land (3:7-11, 16-19). He extensively quotes Psalm 95, which details that generation's unfaithfulness and admonishes Israel not to follow in their footsteps. The author of Psalm 95 and the author of Hebrews alike encourage their readers not to be like the wilderness generation, with unbelieving, disobedient hearts (3:12-15). They did not enter the promised land ("enter his rest" – verse 18) because of their unbelief and disobedience. The Psalmist tells the Israelites that "today" they must not harden their hearts as those in the wilderness did.

In chapter four, the author of Hebrews takes the idea of God's rest for the wilderness generation and applies it to his readers. For the believer, the promise of entering God's rest remains: "Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it" (4:1). However, if we want to enter this rest, we cannot have hard hearts like the wilderness generation.

Here the author uses "already-not yet" language, so common in the book of Hebrews. Our promise of rest is sure in Christ, so the author has confidence to say, "For we who have believed enter that rest" (3). This is the "already" aspect of the promise. But we also read the "not yet" part of the promise when he writes in verses six and seven, "Since therefore it remains for some to enter [the rest]," followed by an encouragement to be faithful "today" (alluding to Psalm 95:7). "Today" refers to the time period we are now in, before entering God's rest; see Hebrews 3:13: "But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today.'" We still have the opportunity right now, today, to respond to God's grace by believing in Him, which implies obeying him (see Hebrews 3:18-19), and specifically in this context, believing and following Jesus.

This "rest" that awaits us is not the promised land that Joshua brought them into, "for if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on" (4:8). Rather, our rest is the inheritance that God has promised us, our complete salvation, body and soul. So the author states, "So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his" (4:9-10).

These verses are frequently taken out of context to mean that Jesus is our "Sabbath rest," and therefore we no longer need to rest on the weekly Sabbath. The author is saying nothing about our freedom from obeying the fourth commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day." Rather, he is using the Sabbath as a metaphor for the rest that awaits us – our eternal inheritance. If anything, this is all the more reason to rest on the weekly Sabbath as a picture, reminder, and rehearsal of what awaits us. How exciting would it be every week to have a regular practice of resting on the weekly Sabbath, knowing that it points to our future eternal rest.

Concerning our eternal rest, the author encourages his readers to "strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience" (4:11), referring again to the disobedience of the wilderness generation. This is another "not yet" sense of our rest – it is sure in Christ, but we have not arrived yet, so we must press on and not fall away. We must not abandon Christ, or we will abandon our rest. If we disobey by denying Christ, we will be judged by the living and active Word of God and will be exposed before him to whom we must give account (4:12-13).

Jesus, Our High Priest

Now the author returns to the concept of Jesus as our high priest, having briefly mentioned it for the first time in 2:17 and a couple verses later in 3:1, where he stated:

Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house (Hebrews 2:17-3:2).

Here the author states that Jesus became a merciful and faithful high priest. To understand this, we need to understand the role of the earthly high priest. The Levitical priests were the spiritual leaders in the Israelite community. Exodus 28:1 makes clear that only Aaron's line was to serve as the priests of Israel. Their primary role was to oversee the temple and temple worship, serving as mediators between God and man, and offering sacrifices on behalf of the people. The high priest was chosen from this priesthood, so he too was a descendent of Aaron. In fact, the first high priest was Aaron himself. As high priest, he had the special role of being able to enter the Most Holy Place behind the veil, which contained the ark of the covenant, once a year on the Day of Atonement, where he would make atonement for himself and for the people. He was able to represent the people before God because he was human himself.

Starting in chapter seven, we will begin to discuss the differences between Jesus's priesthood and the Levitical or Aaronic priesthood. But for now, the author focuses on Jesus' ability to function as high priest because he can represent humanity, being fully human, "like his brothers in every respect." Jesus knows exactly what it is like to be a human being and exactly what it is like to suffer while being tempted, though he himself never sinned. Therefore, he can help us when we are being tempted. Recall the original audience of Hebrews – first century believers who were tempted to turn away from their Messiah and return to Judaism, likely because of the strain of ongoing persecution for their beliefs (cf. 10:32-34). Just as the earthly high priest was fully human who could sympathize with those he interceded for, so Jesus understands our weaknesses and the strain of persecution, as Hebrews explains here:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin (4:14-15).

The reason we can hold fast to our belief in Christ is because of his high priestly work in the heavens. He understands the trials and temptations we go through because he was made to be like us and therefore can represent us as a high priest. He fully understands our weaknesses because he too became a man and experienced the fullness of humanity. This does not mean that he experienced every temptation that exists, but rather, that he fully experienced trials and temptations, and moreover, did not

give in to sin but remained sinless. Therefore he can help us overcome any trial or temptation. Because of this, the author continues,

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (16).

Because Jesus represents us in the heavens before God as our great high priest, we can draw near to the throne of grace. What does it mean to “draw near”? The verb here is προσέρχομαι (*proserchomai*) and occurs seven times in the book of Hebrews. It means “to come to, go to, approach” (MGD). So through the work of Christ as our high priest, we have confidence to approach God’s throne, where we are guaranteed to find mercy and grace because our high priest understands our weaknesses and stands ready to help us through any trial or temptation, any time of need.

To “draw near” to God is a theme in the Torah, and especially in the book of Leviticus, and the original readers would have immediately recognized this connection. In the opening chapters of Leviticus, God calls to his people and shows them how to approach him in the tabernacle. In verse two, he says, “When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock.” The word for offering in Hebrew is קָרְבָּן (*qorbān*), and its root is the verb קָרַב (*qārab*), which means “come near, approach, draw near” (Arnold). In Leviticus, God details five different offerings (*qorbān*), showing his people how to approach his throne. The priests played a key role in these offerings as they were brought to the sons of Aaron, who oversaw the giving of the offering and sometimes ate some of it, depending on the type of *qorbān* given. The audience of Hebrews would be familiar with this practice and would see the powerful imagery that Jesus is our eternal and effective means of drawing near to the throne, and that all of these sacrifices were shadows of the perfect and complete work he accomplished as our high priest – themes that the author of Hebrews will thoroughly explore in the coming chapters.

It is because of Jesus that we have confidence to approach God’s throne, but this does not mean that Old Testament saints could not approach God. As we just described, God invited them to approach him in a tangible way at the tabernacle through various offerings. What we must understand is that they approached him through faith in Christ, just as we do. Hebrews 11:4-5 states that OT saints such as Abel and Enoch pleased God through faith; then, Hebrews 11:6 explains that without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would draw near (*proserchomai*) to God must believe that he exists and rewards those who earnestly seek him – those such as Abel, Enoch, and the many other OT characters he describes throughout chapter eleven.

These saints drew near to God before Christ came. How can this be? It is because they believed in the promise of the gospel, even though it was not fully revealed to them (11:13). They were “drawing near” to God through faith in the coming Messiah; they believed the promises that God had in store for them. They didn’t understand how it would all be realized through the life and death of Christ, but their faith was in whatever God did reveal to them. They believed, acted on their belief, and drew near to God.

There is no drawing near apart from Christ. Those before Christ were responding to promises that hinge on the work of Christ, even though it was before he completed the work. They believed in the hope to come. The animal sacrifices could not perfect them but were only a shadow of the work of Christ, which the author will describe in Hebrews 10.

So through Christ, we have confidence to approach God, just as through faith in the coming Christ, the OT saints could approach God. Hebrews 4:16 says we draw near in full assurance of faith. Later in chapter 11, the author defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). The readers of Hebrews and we today have the added benefit of seeing more of the complete picture, since Jesus has already suffered and died, and is risen again. He has ascended into heaven and functions as our high priest. Yet there are still things we await and hope for – the rest before us – and the author of Hebrews encourages his readers to press on in this hope throughout the letter.

Behind the Curtain?

Hebrews 4:16 says we can draw near to the throne of grace. Does this mean we currently have access to the holy of holies in the heavenly tabernacle? This is a difficult topic to wrestle through. In the earthly temple, only the high priest could enter the holy of holies, and he just once a year (see Leviticus 16; Hebrews 9:7). Jesus is our high priest, not in the earthly tabernacle, but in the heavenly tabernacle (Hebrews 4:14; cf 8:4), and it is there that He enters as our representative behind the curtain, into the most holy place, the throne room of God. In Hebrews 4:16, the author explains that we have confidence to approach the throne of grace because of Christ’s role as our high priest. While we are not physically in the heavenly throne room, we enter via our representative, because of his blood shed for us and his role as our high priest (Hebrews 10:19).

This idea is expanded on at the end of chapter six. Here the author again urges his readers that they must not fall away from Christ, returning to the law apart from him. Rather, they are to press on and “have the full assurance of hope until the end” (6:11b), the hope being our eternal inheritance in Christ. He then gives Abraham as an example. Abraham could trust God to give him his inheritance because God 1) made a promise and 2) confirmed it with an oath – and these things are sure because God cannot lie (6:13-18). Likewise, the readers of Hebrews should “have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before [them]” (6:18b). He continues:

We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 6:19-20).

This passage helps to clarify our question above. While we do not currently have physical access behind the curtain, our hope has entered into the most holy place in the heavens. In other words, Jesus has entered behind the curtain as our high priest. And if he is our forerunner, we too will go there. That is why we can approach the throne of grace with confidence. Christ is there on our behalf. He is

perfected; his work on the cross is complete. He has promised us that we will one day receive the inheritance of eternal life as a new creation with him. This hope enters into the inner curtain, and one day we will too. The author will expand on this idea in chapter ten.

Questions to Consider

We now begin our in-depth study of what some would consider the heart of Hebrews, chapters seven through ten. Before we begin, let's consider some key questions that we will address:

- Who was Melchizedek?
- What was the purpose of the Levitical Priesthood?
- Why were animal sacrifices needed? What did they accomplish?
- Now that Jesus has offered his sacrifice, is there any current or future role for animal sacrifices?
- What is the new covenant? Is it in effect today?

We seek to understand what the author of Hebrews thought about these things, and, moreover, what our God thinks about them.

Hebrews Chapter 7

7:1-10

The author of Hebrews first mentions Melchizedek in 5:6-10 and then again in 6:20. In both places, we learn that Jesus is a high priest after the order of Melchizedek. In chapter seven, the author develops this idea. Who was Melchizedek? Little is said of him in the Bible. We meet him in Genesis fourteen, after Abraham (then known as Abram) rescued his nephew Lot from Chedorlaomer. When Abraham returned in victory, Melchizedek king of Salem came out to meet him, bringing bread and wine (14:18). This Melchizedek, described as “priest of God Most High” (14:18) blessed Abraham, and Abraham in turn tithed a tenth of all the spoils of war to Melchizedek (14:21).

The only other reference we have of Melchizedek outside of Hebrews is Psalm 110:4, which states, “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.’” Psalm 110, written by King David, is full of Messianic significance, and the author of Hebrews understood this, for it is this verse that he quotes and alludes to in chapters five, six, and seven.

Do we know anything else about Melchizedek? There is a Jewish belief that he was Shem, one of the sons of Noah. The Talmud teaches,

Said R. Zechariah in the name of R. Ishmael, “The Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to bring forth the priesthood through Shem: ‘And he, Melchizedek, was the priest of the most high God’ (Gen. 14:18) (Nedarim 1.18).

While we cannot know for certain, Shem would have still been alive at this time in history and could have been Melchizedek. This would explain where Melchizedek received his knowledge of the one true God, from his father Noah.

In Hebrews, the author briefly summarizes the Genesis account about Melchizedek and then makes a few distinct points about the man. First, he focuses on his names/titles. Melchizedek means “king of righteousness.” Further, he was king of Salem, which means “king of peace.” The author therefore stresses that these qualities were part of the character of this man (7:2).

Second, Melchizedek is said to be “... without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever” (7:3). The idea is not that Melchizedek literally did not have a mother or father but rather that the lack of mention of his parents shows that he is a type of Christ. F.F. Bruce comments,

... it is not suggested that he was a biological anomaly, or an angel in human guise. Historically Melchizedek appears to have belonged to a dynasty of priest-kings in which he had both predecessors and successors. If this point had been put to our author, he would have agreed at once, no doubt; but this consideration was foreign to his purpose. The important consideration was the account given of Melchizedek in holy writ; to him the silences of Scripture were as much due to divine inspiration as were its statements. In the only record which Scripture provides of Melchizedek Gen. 14:18–20 nothing is said of his parentage, nothing is said of his ancestry or progeny, nothing is said of his birth, nothing is said of his death (159-160).

Why does the author bring this issue up? Not to discuss the lack of genealogy of Melchizedek or Christ, but rather to show that neither of them were of Levitical descent and yet still are priests (Cockerill, 300). The fact that the Messiah does not come from the tribe of Levi does not disqualify him for a priestly office. Rather, because Jesus is a high priest after the order of Melchizedek, his office is superior to that of Levi. The author makes this case by pointing out that Abraham tithed to Melchizedek; therefore Levi, in the loins of Abraham, tithed to Melchizedek (7:4-9). Since “...it is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior” (7:7), then the Levitical priesthood is inferior to Jesus’ priesthood. He thus emphasizes “... how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils!” (7:4).

7:11

After introducing Melchizedek, the author shows the insufficiency of the Levitical priesthood:

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? (7:11)

What is meant by the term “perfection” in this verse? The Greek word is *τελείωσις* (*teleiosis*), which means completion or fulfillment. Ellingworth explains that in Hebrews, the word has a sense of

“...reaching a goal or fulfilling a function” (371). What is this goal that was not attainable through the Levites? Cockerill states that it is “... ultimate access to God through a definitive removal of sin” (8), something only Jesus was able to provide. Ceremonial sacrifices cannot make a person perfect. Their atonement is temporary; the need for atonement is continual. The writer of Hebrews will develop this idea more in the chapters to come.

Thus, we wrestle with the question, what did the animal sacrifices accomplish? The parts of the Torah that deal with atonement and sin are shadows and pointers to the work of Christ. They teach us about the seriousness of our sin and God’s need for justice. At the same time, they demonstrate an insufficiency and a need for an effectual sacrifice. The sacrifices ought to awaken a yearning for a sufficient sacrifice. They ought to create a longing for complete access to God, a definitive end to sin, and a perfect relationship with God.

It is important to have an overall understanding of the purpose of the Torah, the law of God. The Torah is not and never has been about salvation by works. Paul says in Galatians three, “Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law” (21). Paul’s point is that righteousness is not by the Torah, but by the promises of God. The law could not save a person; rather, it teaches us the way we should walk and live, and it gives us constant reminders of these ways, that we would not go after our own flesh (e.g., Numbers 15:28-40). Through the Torah, we learn about and walk in God’s commandments as he sanctifies us and makes us more like his Son.

In the same way, the people of God were never saved by means of animal sacrifices. Rather, they were responding in obedience to God’s commands regarding what to do when they sinned. Yet all the while, the sacrifices could not complete the work of atoning for our sin, once for all. For that, we need another priest, after the order of Melchizedek—Jesus, through whom perfection is attainable. He is the one who can give us eternal access to the Father. He is the one who can permanently end our sin.

Likewise, Lane states,

The concept of *τελείωσις* is thus eschatological: the fulfillment of the promises of the new covenant in the priestly ministry of Christ makes possible an access to God and relationship with him that was not possible under the former covenant (181).

To clarify, believers could and did draw near to God under the Levitical priesthood. Lane agrees: “[T]he writer does not absolutely deny to the people of the old covenant the possibility of ‘drawing near to God’” (ibid). That is what the entire book of Leviticus is about. But now we have a better hope, a sure hope, based on a complete and final act.

Some commentators such as F.F. Bruce infer from Hebrews 7:11 that the old covenant, namely the

Torah or Law, has already been replaced by the new covenant. In Bruce's interpretation, first century Christians understood

... the Levitical priesthood as something belonging to the age of preparation, which had now given way to the age of fulfilment; but they were in danger of concluding that, after all, the old order (including the Levitical priesthood and everything else that went with it) had still much to be said in its favor (166).

According to Bruce, since Christ is a superior high priest to that of the Levites, then the job of the Levitical priesthood has been superseded and ended. It had a place in history to prepare for Christ, and now has nothing to offer.

Yet in this verse, the author of Hebrews is not making this argument. The insufficiency of the Levites does not imply that the Levitical priesthood has ended. Ellingworth comments,

This does not necessarily mean that the author thought that the old order had already ended ... In the present passage, his concern is with the contrast between the old and new orders as such; the present survival of the earlier cultus is not in focus (371).

Up to this point, the author stresses that the Melchizedekian priesthood is superior to and more effective than the Levitical priesthood, not that it has replaced it or that the old covenant has ended.

7:12-14

In Hebrews 7:12, the author continues, "For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well." Here he makes a logical argument. If the priesthood changes, then the law necessarily undergoes a change, since the priesthood is part of the law. What is the change in the priesthood? The following verses contain the answer:

For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests (13-14).

The change in the priesthood is that there is a high priest (Jesus) who is not from the line of Aaron. Exodus 28:1 tells us that priests were to come from Aaron: "Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests" (cf. Numbers 3:10; 16:40). Jesus, however, was not descended from Levi but from Judah. If Jesus is a high priest, then this stands in contrast to what is said about the Levitical priesthood in the Torah.

What does "change" mean, and what does it not mean? Traditionally, commentators understand a change in the law to mean a replacement of the old Aaronic priesthood by the new Melchizedekian priesthood, and moreover a replacement of the Mosaic law with something new. Bruce explains it as such:

That priesthood was instituted under the Mosaic law, and was so integral to it that a change in the priesthood carries with it inevitably a change in the law. If the Aaronic priesthood was instituted for a temporary purpose, to be brought to an end when the age of fulfillment dawned, the same must be true of the law under which that priesthood was introduced ... the law was a temporary dispensation of God, valid only until Christ came to inaugurate the age of perfection (166-167).

Note that Bruce understands change to imply something being brought to an end, something that was temporary and is no longer valid.

Yet, regarding this same passage, Ellingworth notes, “In the present verse, both noun and verb should be understood neutrally as “change,” not of the “removal” of law altogether” (374). As he did with verse eleven, Ellingworth is careful to note what the writer of Hebrews says and what he does not say. The author simply states there has been a change, but not that the prior has been replaced.

If we look at this passage in isolation, perhaps it would seem that the Aaronic priesthood has ended since the priesthood has changed. Problems arise, however, when we find other passages that show a continuing role for the Levitical priesthood on earth. Consider these:

And the LORD said to Moses, “Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. Therefore say, ‘Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.’” (Numbers 25:10–13).

“For thus says the LORD: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to make sacrifices forever.” The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: “Thus says the LORD: If you can break my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my covenant with David my servant may be broken, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and my covenant with the Levitical priests my ministers. As the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the offspring of David my servant, and the Levitical priests who minister to me” (Jeremiah 33:17–22).

In Numbers, God gives Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, a perpetual priesthood. In Jeremiah, God says that his covenant with David will never be broken, nor will his covenant with the Levitical priests. David will always have a son to reign on his throne, and the Levites will always serve as ministers to God.

The Hebrew word often translated “perpetual” or “forever” is עולם (*olam*). While it can refer to eternity, it can also imply that something exists continually through a limited period of time, such as a

person's lifetime or to the end of an age ("υ," NIDOTTE, 3:345-346). Because of this, many understand passages such as the Numbers and Jeremiah passages above to mean that the priests will continue as priests until the age of their priesthood is over. We agree with this, but also believe that this age is not yet ended. Ezekiel 44:15-31 tells of a future time in which the Levites are serving as priests. Ezekiel 44:15-16 reads,

But the Levitical priests, the sons of Zadok, who kept the charge of my sanctuary when the people of Israel went astray from me, shall come near to me to minister to me. And they shall stand before me to offer me the fat and the blood, declares the Lord GOD.

Note that the Levitical priests will minister before God, offering sacrifices to him.

If the age of the Levites ended at the death of Christ or even at the destruction of the temple in AD 70, then how is it that they are serving again in the future? These are powerful words that we cannot ignore. Can they be reconciled with what Hebrews says?

The author of Hebrews has presented these ideas: (1) there has been a change in the priesthood in that we have a high priest (Jesus) who is not descended from Aaron, and (2) this necessarily results in a change in the law, since the priesthood is a component of the law.

At this point, we wrestle with how these relate to what the Bible says about the ongoing role of the Levites. As we continue our study of Hebrews, we will begin to see how the writer develops his understanding of these same issues.

7:15-19

The writer now explains the priesthood of Melchizedek, applied to Jesus:

This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. For it is witnessed of him, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek" (7:15-17).

He shows the validity of Jesus' priesthood, which is not based on a specific lineage as is the case with the Levites. The writer describes the Levitical priesthood as based on a legal requirement concerning bodily descent. The Greek word for bodily is *σάρκινος* (*sarkinos*), which means "pertaining to being material or belong to the physical realm, material, physical, human, fleshly" (BDAG, 914). Thus, the author connects the Levitical priesthood with things of this earth and our dwelling in the flesh. (As is our author's style, he will develop this idea more in the chapters to come.) Jesus' priesthood, in contrast, is based on the power of an indestructible life. The one who lives forever is our high priest. Even David prophesies of him in Psalm 110:4, "You are a priest forever...", quoted here by the author in 7:17.

The writer of Hebrews continues,

For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God (7:18–19).

This refers back to verse eleven, where he states the Levitical priesthood cannot make us perfect, that is, cannot effectually complete atonement for all of our sins. In that sense, it is weak and useless. This commandment is “set aside,” and a better hope is introduced.

What does “set aside” mean? The Greek word is ἀθέτησις (*athetesis*) and means a refusal to recognize the validity of something; an annulment (BDAG, 24). The author has begun to juxtapose two priesthoods: the priesthood of the Levites and the priesthood of Melchizedek. God has not taken the Levitical priesthood and changed it into something different under which Jesus can operate as high priest. In other words, the Levitical priesthood has not been transformed into the Melchizedekian. God has not set aside or annulled the basic tenets of the Levitical priesthood for the Levites. As we will see, Levites can still function as priests under the principles of their priesthood (8:4).

But Jesus functions under a completely different priesthood. With regard to Jesus’ work, the tenets of the Levitical priesthood are set aside. Specifically, the stipulation that Jesus must be a descendent of Levi is set aside, and a better hope is introduced. For Jesus functions as high priest after the order of Melchizedek. The regulations of the Levitical priesthood do not apply to Jesus because he is of a different order. Far greater and awesome stipulations apply: To be a high priest in the likeness of Melchizedek, Jesus must have an indestructible life (7:16).

It is good that God sets aside the tenets of the Levitical priesthood with regard to Jesus because the Levitical priesthood could not bring about perfection (7:11); Jesus as high priest can. We must not apply a priesthood to him that could not accomplish what he did accomplish with power and efficacy. The Levitical priesthood is weak and useless to complete a permanent atonement for our sins, but Jesus, through his indestructible life, introduced a better hope that allows us to draw near to God (7:19).

With this in mind, we can return to our consideration of 7:12: “For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.” The change in the law is that a new priesthood has been introduced—not one that replaces the earthly Levitical priesthood, but one that has a different role and a greater purpose, to bring about our perfection. This is the priesthood under which Jesus functions as our heavenly high priest.

7:20-28

The writer has already established that Jesus is a valid high priest. As he did in the beginning of chapter seven, he now reaffirms that not only is Jesus’ high priesthood valid, but it is in fact superior to the

Levitical. He introduces a better hope (7:19) guaranteed by an oath from God himself (7:20-21). Therefore, Jesus' priesthood is not only based on the power of an indestructible life (16), but it is also guaranteed through an oath made by God (20-21). And as the writer has already established at the end of chapter six, God cannot lie and must be faithful to what he swears he will do (6:13-20). For the second time, the writer quotes Psalm 110:4, this time including the beginning of the verse, "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind." His purpose is to demonstrate that God has validated Jesus' priesthood with his own word, which cannot change. Therefore, "This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant" (7:22).

Jesus' covenant is better because he is an effective, eternal high priest:

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them (7:23-25).

Unlike the Levites, Jesus will never die and therefore permanently holds his office as high priest. He alone, therefore, can completely save us. His eternity ensures that he can guarantee his covenant forever.

Further, his covenant is better because it was initiated with a perfect sacrifice:

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever (7:26-28).

Jesus is the only high priest who is holy, innocent, unstained, and separated from sinners. He is the only high priest that does not need to make atonement for his own sins first. Verse 28 says that the law appoints men in their weakness. They are weak because of their sin. This alludes back to verses 18 and 19, which says the former commandment was weak and useless and could make nothing perfect. Now the author elaborates on this. The Levitical priesthood is weak and useless because the priests themselves are imperfect. They are prevented from continuing in office by death (7:23). They sin and must continually offer sacrifices for both themselves and others (5:2-3; 7:27). In contrast, Christ lives forever (7:23,25); he is perfect and therefore offered an effective, one-time sacrifice (7:27-28).

Hebrews Chapter 8

8:1-5

Chapter eight opens by comparing a heavenly reality and an earthly shadow. Jesus is our high priest,

seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven (8:1); in contrast, the Levites function as priests on earth (8:4). Note the concurrent role of both priesthoods: “Now if [Jesus] were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law” (8:4). This says there are currently priests on earth who offer gifts according to the law. At the same time, Jesus functions as high priest in heaven, not on earth. In fact, 8:4 states that he cannot be a priest on earth. He is of a different priesthood. And yet, the earthly priesthood is not disconnected from the heavenly; it serves as a sketch and shadow of what is in heaven (8:5). Thus, the two priesthoods serve concurrently--one on earth, one in heaven. We see this at work in the early church, when Paul offered sacrifices under the earthly priesthood in Acts 21, even though Jesus had already ascended into heaven and was working as the heavenly high priest. We will discuss Acts 21 in more detail in chapter ten.

In addition to contrasting the heavenly and earthly priesthoods, the author likewise compares the “true tent (or tabernacle)” in heaven (8:2) with Moses’ tent (8:5). Here “true” is used not in the sense of “true and false” but rather in the sense of the original, the reality, and the source. It is the genuine, authentic, real tabernacle, upon which the earthly copy is based. Moses was to make the earthly tabernacle according to the pattern that was shown him on Mount Sinai (8:5). This pattern is based on and points to the true, heavenly tabernacle. The writer will continue to develop these same ideas in chapter nine.

8:6-12

The comparison continues, now focusing on the old and new covenants: “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” (8:6).

Christ’s ministry as high priest is superior to the Levitical priesthood; moreover, the covenant he mediates is superior to the old covenant. In the style of our author, he loops back to a theme he has already touched on in 7:22, where he says that Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant. We have already established that his covenant is better because he as high priest is effective, eternal, and perfect. The author now further develops the superiority of the new covenant by explaining that it is enacted upon better promises (8:6).

The promises are indeed better because the first covenant had fault: “For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. For he finds fault *with them*” (8:7-8a, emphasis ours).

Note that the fault was not with the old covenant per se, but rather with the covenant keepers. The fault was the peoples’. Cockerill comments on this, saying,

The words with which the Jeremiah passage is introduced, “for finding fault with them he says” (v. 8a), point directly to God’s criticism of the wilderness generation in Jer 31:32 (Heb 8:9). It is their failure that evidences the insufficiency of the Old Covenant. The pastor would not describe the deficiency of the Old Covenant in such a way as to relieve the

wilderness generation of responsibility for their disobedience. It is not their inability to obey but their refusal to obey that demonstrates the insufficiency of the first covenant to adequately transform the human heart (366).

The Israelites in the wilderness were held responsible for their disobedience to the covenant. They made the choice to disobey because they had hardened, untransformed hearts.

Quoting Jeremiah 31, the author of Hebrews demonstrates this point:

For he finds fault with them when he says: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with 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. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord (8:8–9).

God says that the new covenant will not be like the old in which the people did not obey. Jeremiah prophesied at a desperate time in Israel’s history. Judah was headed into exile. They repeatedly had disobeyed God and were not living in relationship with him, and now they would experience the most severe of consequences. They had failed at keeping their covenant with God.

But they are not left without hope. Our author continues to quote Jeremiah 31:

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more (8:10–12).

Now we see the better promises referred to in 8:6. God will put his laws on the hearts and minds of his people (8:10). Each will directly know God, needing no teacher (8:11). God will remember their sins no more (8:12). With the old covenant, the people had the law, but the law was not within them, in their hearts and minds. The new covenant is indeed superior, for its commandments are ingrained on the hearts of God’s people. Therefore they will not need to be taught, for they will already know, even in their very inmost being.

8:13

This brings us to one of the most commonly used verses to show the abrogation, or annulment, of the old covenant: “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” (8:13). Lane comments on this verse:

God himself has cancelled [the old covenant’s] validity. He intends to make no further use of the old covenant and the forms through which it operated to achieve his redemptive purpose for his people (210).

Similarly, Bruce states:

The very words “a new covenant” antedate the previous one ... And if the covenant of Moses’ day is antedated, our author further implies, so must be the Aaronic priesthood, the earthly sanctuary, and the Levitical sacrifices, which were all established under that covenant. The age of the law and the prophets is past; the age of the Son is here, and here to stay (195).

Thus, the common understanding of 8:13 is that, because of Christ’s redemptive work, the old covenant is antedated, cancelled, and belonging to the past. But note the tension in this verse. The first part seems to clearly state that the old covenant is now obsolete, and yet the tense changes in the second part of the verse: “And what is *becoming* obsolete and *growing* old is *ready to vanish* away” (emphasis ours). The author can speak of the old covenant as if it were a thing of the past, and yet there is a sense in which it is still active and present, but is near to passing away.

In response to the latter part of 8:13, some commentators say that the author is writing from the viewpoint of Jeremiah, since the passage quoted is from Jeremiah:

The pastor is speaking from Jeremiah’s point of view. As soon as God promised a “new” covenant, the Old was “near to passing away.” Since the New has come in Christ, the Old is no longer “near to” but has definitively passed away as a way of relating to God (Cockerill, 370).

In other words, from Jeremiah’s vantage point, centuries before the coming of Christ, the old covenant was near to passing, but now that Christ has come, the old covenant has truly passed away and been made obsolete.

Ellingworth, however, disagrees with this interpretation:

The language of this verse is sufficiently general to leave open the question whether the author thought of the first covenant as old and moribund already from the time of Jeremiah’s declaration, or only from the time of Christ’s coming and/or death. General considerations suggest that the author was more concerned with the time in which he and his readers were living. Statements about the supersession of the old dispensation appear to grow generally bolder as the argument progresses (cf. 7:18f.; 10:9, 18); yet the continued existence of the first covenant is never completely denied (418).

We agree with Ellingworth. Just a few verses prior, the author stated that there is currently a priesthood functioning on earth (8:4-5). This earthly priesthood is Levitical, from the old covenant, which therefore must still be current. Its existence is not denied. But there is something greater that we have already tasted, that we are looking forward to: a heavenly priesthood and a new covenant. It is here, but it is not fully here.

In our introduction, we discussed the “already-not yet” tension in the book of Hebrews. Repeatedly, the

author of Hebrews sets forth a tension between what will come and what already is. A clear example is Hebrews 2:7-8:

You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet.” Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. ***At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him*** (emphasis ours).

Note that everything is put in subjection to Christ, and yet at present we do not yet see this played out. Another example is in Hebrews four, when the author talks about the rest that we enter. In 4:3 he says, “we who have believed enter that rest,” and yet a few verses later, he says, “Let us therefore strive to enter that rest” (4:11). In one sense, we have already entered that rest, and yet in another, we must continually strive and press forward, looking forward to the rest as the goal.

8:13 fits our author’s pattern of writing: we are in the new covenant, and therefore we can consider the old obsolete. And yet in another sense, we cannot. It still plays a role. Further, when we look at the Jeremiah 31 description of the new covenant, does it seem to describe the present age? Or does it depict a future time? If it is future, what role does the old covenant have today?

Hebrews Chapter 9

9:1-10

The author of Hebrews continues by describing the earthly tabernacle, which belongs to the first covenant (9:1). He briefly describes the first section of the tent, known as the Holy Place, and tells some of the items that are within it (the lampstand, the bread of the Presence). Likewise, he describes the second section, the Most Holy Place, which only the high priest could enter, and only one time a year. This occurred on Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). On this day, the high priest was permitted to enter with blood, offered both for his own sins and the sins of the nation (9:7). The author then states,

By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation (Hebrews 9:8–10).

In this passage, the author equates the Holy Place with the present age. He connects the Holy Place with the regulations of the law, which according to him, still have a current role. They function not only in the past but also at present. The implication is that the law is still applicable.

Some commentators prefer translations such as the New English Translation, which reads, “This was a symbol for the time *then* present” (9:9a, emphasis ours). This translation suggests that the Holy Place was a symbol or illustration pointing to Christ before his coming, but now that he has come, we are in

the age of reformation and thus are no longer under the regulations of the law. There is ambiguity in the Greek, with a variety of ways to understand the verse, though many translations read like the ESV: “which is symbolic for the present age,” including NIV (1984), NAS, NRSV, and NIV (2011).

Despite some translations that suggest otherwise, the larger context of Hebrews supports the idea that we are still looking forward to an age to come, a fulfillment, a time of restoration. At present, we wait and long for what is to come. In chapter two, the author tells us that “at present,” we do not yet see all things in subjection to Christ (2:8). In chapter three, we are to exhort each other as long as it is called “today” and hold our confidence to the end (3:14). In chapter four, he writes of a “rest” that awaits us, that remains for us, and that we strive to enter (4:9-10). In chapter six he says that we have tasted the “powers of the age to come” (6:5) and repeats his encouragement to hold firm until the end (6:11). In chapter seven, the author encourages that “a better hope is introduced” (7:19). In chapter eight, the old covenant is growing old and is ready to vanish away (8:13), but still remains at present. This brings us to chapter nine, where the “first section is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age)” (9:8-9). The author will continue with this theme in the chapters to come, admonishing his audience to press on and hold fast because something great awaits us, but we must endure the present age. We are not in the fullness of the age of restoration yet.

The regulations of the present age specify what to do when an individual or the nation as a whole sins, and yet they have a superficial, external function. They cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, but instead deal with regulations for the body (9:9-10). The Greek word for body is *σάρξ* (*sarx*) and refers to the flesh or physical body. As in 7:16, the author continues his development of the idea that the law, including the priesthood and the regulations, has to do with our earthly bodies. These laws have been set in place until the time of reformation, which is juxtaposed with the present age. Thus the author is setting up a contrast between the old covenant presently at work, which can only purify the flesh, and the new covenant, whose fulfillment is yet future, and which can purify our spirits. During the time of reformation, there will be no more regulations for dealing with sin and our consciences will be perfected.

9:11-14

The author continues,

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption (9:11–12).

Christ stands in contrast to the earthly high priests who continually had to enter the most holy place, each year on Yom Kippur. Christ has entered once for all, by his own blood, securing for us an eternal redemption. The animal sacrifices were limited in that they could only atone for one sin at a time (or, in the case of Yom Kippur, the sins committed that year), with the continual need to offer more and more

sacrifices because we continue to sin. But Christ’s redemption is eternal, and therefore, far superior. As is his custom, the author develops the same themes he has already addressed. Recall in 7:22 forward, the author shows that Jesus is able to save us to the uttermost because he is the sinless one who lives.

There is, once again, tension in these verses as to when these things occur. The author says that Christ entered the holy place once for all. It is a finished act, in the past, with no need for repetition. He appeared as high priest of the good things *that have come* (9:11, emphasis ours). Some manuscripts read, “good things to come.” The question is, have the good things come, or do they still await us? We hold to the “already/not yet” understanding so prevalent in this letter. The good things have come in part because they have been secured for us by the work of Christ, but we still look forward to their consummation. That is, in fact, what the writer says in verse twelve: Christ has secured for us an eternal redemption, though we do not yet fully experience what God has in store for us.

In verses thirteen and fourteen, the author argues that Jesus’ blood is more effective than the blood of bulls and goats:

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God (9:13-14).

Here we see the role of the animal sacrifices: they were to sanctify for the purification of the flesh. The author returns to the same themes he presents in 7:16 and 9:10, where the law is connected to our earthly bodies. As in 9:10, the word flesh is *sarx*, which literally means flesh or physical body. Christ’s sacrifice is far superior because it cleanses our consciences. The law provides an external, temporal cleansing that creates a longing for our very spirits to be cleansed, which is only accomplished through the blood of the Messiah.

For the last several chapters, the author has been comparing Jesus’ priesthood with the Levitical priesthood. Jesus’ priesthood is far superior to the Levitical, but it has not replaced it. Rather, they have different purposes and even locations, as summed up in this table:

	Levitical	Jesus	References
Location	On Earth	In heaven	8:1-5
Purpose	Outward, temporary, ritual cleansing	Eternal cleansing of our consciences	9:9b-14; 10:1-4; 10:11-12
Work	Repeated sacrifices (daily and annual)	One-time sacrifice	7:27; 9:6-7; 9:25-26; 10:11-12
State	Weak, sinful	Perfect, innocent	5:1-3; 7:26-28
Time	Present age	Age of Reformation	8:13; 9:8-10

Let's keep these differences in mind as we continue in chapter nine.

9:15-28

The author of Hebrews continues,

Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant (9:15).

Christ's death has the power to redeem us from our transgressions. As in 9:14, the author shows the power of the blood of Christ. It is not merely an external cleansing but cleanses our spirits, redeeming us from our transgressions. Because of this, we "may receive the promised eternal inheritance." While on this earth and in these bodies, have we received this promised inheritance, or does the promise still await us? The author will answer this as he continues his argument.

In 9:16-17, he gives the analogy of a will, which is the same word translated "covenant" in verse fifteen. The word is διαθήκη (*diatheke*) and can mean both "last will and testament" and "compact, contract" (BDAG, 228).

For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive (9:16-17).

The author argues that a will goes into effect only after a death. In the same way, Christ had to die for us to enter the new covenant and receive our inheritance.

Likewise, the law was inaugurated with blood:

Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you." And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (9:18-22).

Repeatedly, the author shows the connection between the law and the work of Christ. They do not stand in opposition to each other. The law points to and creates a longing for the more effectual work that Jesus accomplished on the cross.

He further demonstrates this here:

Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself (9:23–26).

The copies of the heavenly things are the earthly things: the law, the tabernacle, the Levitical priesthood, and the animal sacrifices (8:5; 9:1-5). If they were purified by the blood of animals, then the heavenly realities must be purified as well, with a superior sacrifice. As our heavenly high priest, Christ did not need to enter the earthly temple to bring external purification of the flesh, for that was already being done by earthly priests (8:4). Instead he entered the very presence of the Father, and his sacrifice was far superior. He does not have to continually suffer, but has permanently put away sin. Unlike the regulations of the old covenant, Christ's sacrifice is eternally efficacious (cf. 7:23-25; 9:11-12).

What does it mean that Christ “put away sin”? It does not mean that we no longer sin, but rather that the price has been paid. However while in this fleshly body, we still struggle against sin and strive to overcome, as we await the fullness of the kingdom.

Now, we receive the answer to the question raised in verse fifteen: Have we received the promised eternal inheritance?

And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (9:27–28).

When Christ returns, he will not “deal with sin,” for he has already accomplished that eternally efficacious work. Rather, when he returns, he will save us who are eagerly waiting for him. We have not yet received our full salvation. Once more, Hebrews displays the “already-not yet” tension. We are saved, and yet not fully. There is so much more that awaits us, when we will put these sinful, earthly bodies aside forever.

Hebrews Chapter 10

10:1-4

The author of Hebrews goes on to say,

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered,

since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? (10:1-2).

Here, he calls the law a shadow (cf. 8:5). Paul uses similar shadow imagery in Colossians 2:17, which reads, “These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” In this passage, Paul refers to the biblical holy days in the law as a shadow (Colossians 2:16-17). What does it mean that the law is a shadow? It functions as a shadow because it reveals to us something about the reality, yet it is not the reality itself. For example, in the law, God commands his people to keep the Passover every year (Deuteronomy 16:1-8). The Passover commemorates a real event in Israel’s history, their redemption from slavery out of Egypt. Yet at the same time, it is a shadow that points to a greater fulfillment of the Passover by Christ. This annual remembrance and celebration hints at and points to the reality of what Christ did for us on the cross, redeeming us from our slavery to sin (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

We cannot have a shadow apart from its reality. To detach the law from the work of Christ and the heavenly realities is to obey in vain, without meaning or substance. We must fix our eyes on the reality. But this does not mean that we ignore the shadow. As we celebrate Passover each year, we can rejoice in the work Christ did for us. As we keep the Sabbath each week, we long for and expect the heavenly rest that awaits us (Hebrews 4:8-11).

Hebrews 10:1 says that the law is a shadow of the good things to come. Again, the author stresses the tension between the “already” and the “not yet.” The good things still await us. We are not fully experiencing the reality of our salvation (9:28). For this reason, it is all the more important that we do not ignore the shadow. In the law, we have things that we do and experience and walk through that point to the fullness of Christ’s work and our salvation. We do not yet have the reality, so if we get rid of the shadow, what are we left with? Perhaps we can imagine in our minds what it will be like, but how much greater is it to experience and walk out a shadow of the reality.

The New Jerusalem Bible translates this phrase in 10:1 as “of the good things that have come,” implying that the good things have already arrived. This is based in part on Hebrews 9:11, which says, “Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come.” We must understand this in the “already-not yet” framework. In one sense, the good things have come because Christ has completed his saving work. It is finished. Yet in another sense, we wait for the fullness of these good things as we await our salvation. Cockerill supports this when he says,

Thus the “good things” yet “to come” from the Old Covenant point of view are the “good things that have come” in Christ (9:11) **plus that final salvation to be received at his second coming** (9:28) though provided for by his first. He has made cleansing from sin and access to God available for the faithful as means for perseverance. He has also opened the way for those who do persevere to enter God’s presence finally, “once for all,” at the Judgment. What “good things” could be better than the saving work of Christ past, present, and future? (429, emphasis ours).

The large majority of translations read “of the good things to come” (ESV, NET, NIV, NAS, KJV, and more). We have a sure hope through Christ’s finished work that we will receive the good things still to come, so much so that we can consider them as our possession, even though we do not yet experience them.

Though the law as a shadow is good, the author of Hebrews stresses that we must not overly focus on the shadow and ignore the reality of Christ, because the law cannot make us perfect by the sacrifices continually offered. If the sacrifices could bring perfection, or an end to our sin, there would no longer be a need for them to be offered, year after year. He says that if the law could perfect us, we would no longer have consciousness of our sins (10:2). This reaffirms the tension between the present age and the age to come. Under the law, there is consciousness of sins. Recall these passages from chapter nine:

By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing (which is symbolic for the present age). According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that **cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper**, but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed **until the time of reformation** (9:8–10, emphasis ours).

and

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, **purify our conscience** from dead works to serve the living God (9:13–14, emphasis ours).

The Greek words for “consciousness” and “conscience” used in these verses have the same root, συνείδησις (*suneidesis*), which means both “awareness of information about something, consciousness” and “the inward faculty of distinguishing right and wrong, moral consciousness, conscience” (BDAG, 967). The writer continues to develop these thoughts in 10:22 (“our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience”). The question is, in the present age do we still have consciousness of our sins? And, do we have a clean conscience, or do we still sin? As John says in his first letter,

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (1 John 1:8–10).

The author of Hebrews depicts the present age as one in which we struggle with our flesh and wrestle with sin. We have the law and experience the shadow, which points to our future perfection, but cannot cleanse us from our sins. We recognize the finished work of Christ, the guarantee of the good things to come (7:22). We strive to live free of sin, to have clean consciences. And we await the time when we will have no consciousness of sins, when we will have pure consciences, because we will truly be without sin.

At present, however, we have a reminder of sins:

But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (10:3-4).

Hebrews 10:4 seems to stand in contrast to what the law says about animal sacrifices. Repeatedly, the Torah says that sacrifices do actually atone for sin. Consider these verses:

If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD. He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him **to make atonement for him** (Leviticus 1:3-4, emphasis ours).

And all its fat he shall remove, as the fat is removed from the peace offerings, and the priest shall burn it on the altar for a pleasing aroma to the LORD. And the priest shall **make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven** (Leviticus 4:31, emphasis ours).

On the eighth day he shall bring two turtledoves or two pigeons to the priest to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and the priest shall offer one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering, and **make atonement for him** (Numbers 6:10-11a, emphasis ours).

These are just a few of the many verses that say likewise. So then, what does it mean that the sacrifices atone for sins? They provide an external atonement for the specific sin that the sacrifice was offered for. For example, if a person were to steal from his neighbor, he would be required to restore what he stole in full, add a fifth to it, and then sacrifice a ram without blemish. The priest would make atonement for him and he would be forgiven (Leviticus 6:1-7). The author of Hebrews does not take issue with this. The problem is that we as human beings continue to sin because of our sinful natures, so there is a need for continual sacrifices. As stated in 9:13-14, the animal sacrifices could purify our flesh, but not our conscience. This is what the author of Hebrews focuses on repeatedly. The job is never done. Day after day. Year after year. Again and again. What we need is an internal cleansing of our spirits.

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to *permanently* take away sins. They must be continually offered because they cannot purify our spirits. This shadow stands in strong contrast to the work of Christ, who secured for us an eternal redemption, not by the blood of bulls and goats, but by his own blood (9:12). The blood of Christ promises the purification and perfection of our conscience (9:13-14) because one day we will sin no more. We will see this more clearly as the author of Hebrews details Jeremiah's new covenant promises for the second time, beginning in 10:15.

10:5-10

Next, our author writes:

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book’” (10:5–7).

Here, he quotes Psalm 40:6-8a, written by David, yet the author of Hebrews applies the words as if Christ said them. What is meant by, “a body have you prepared for me”? The idea is one of complete obedience. Bruce comments,

Wholehearted obedience is the sacrifice which God really desires, the sacrifice which he received in perfection from his Servant-Son when he came into the world. As for the other kinds of sacrifice enumerated in the psalm, they had religious worth only insofar as they were the tangible expression of a devoted and obedient heart; the great prophets never tired of insisting that God did not desire them for their own sake (240).

This is stressed repeatedly throughout the Old Testament:

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (Psalm 51:16–17).

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings (Hosea 6:6).

And Samuel said, “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams (1 Samuel 15:22).

The sacrifices in and of themselves are limited. First, and foremost, they are shadows, and are empty of meaning apart from the reality of Christ. Second, God does not desire them, and indeed they are even abhorrent to him, apart from a heart of obedience (cf. Isaiah 66:3).

Jesus had this perfect heart of obedience. He knew that the sacrifices and offerings were insufficient, and that what was needed was his perfect submission to the will of the Father, bringing about the salvation of our souls.

The writer of Hebrews follows the quote of Psalm 40 with his explanation:

When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (10:8–10).

The argument is straightforward. God takes no pleasure in sacrifices. These sacrifices are of the law. Instead, his delight is in perfect obedience, and in this case, the obedience of Christ unto death.

Therefore, God does away with the “first,” the Old Testament sacrifices, to establish the “second,” perfect obedience to the Father.

The word “establish” in 10:9 is ἵστημι (*histēmi*) which means to put, to place, or to stand. It has the sense of standing firm. For example, the same word is used in 1 Corinthians 7:37 where it is translated “firmly established,” as well as 2 Corinthians 1:24 (“stand firm”), Ephesians 6:13 (“to stand firm”), and 1 Peter 5:12 (“stand firm”). Christ has firmly established the surety of our perfect obedience – though we do not perfectly obey at this point, his obedience unto death is so effective that it will one day result in our perfect obedience, when sin will be no more.

Does Hebrews 10:9 mean that God has abrogated the law? Are the sacrifices done away with? Can the new covenant annul the old covenant? Consider what Paul says in Galatians three:

To give a human example, brothers: even with a man-made covenant, no one annuls it or adds to it once it has been ratified. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring ... This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void (Galatians 3:15,17).

Here, Paul refers to the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant. The newer covenant, in this case the Mosaic, cannot annul the one that came before it. So what does Hebrews 10:9 mean when it says, “He does away with the first in order to establish the second”? We will continue our study through verse eighteen and then return to this question.

Let’s note one more thing before continuing with the passage. The author quotes Psalm 40:6-8a, but leaves off the second half of verse eight. Psalm 40:8 in its entirety reads: “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.” Recall from Jeremiah 31, that the law written upon our hearts is one of the key components of the new covenant: “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” (Jeremiah 31:33). It seems our author has the new covenant in mind once again. The readers would not have missed this connection.

10:11-14

He continues,

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified (10:11–14).

Once more, he argues that Christ’s single offering is the offering that is eternal and effectual. The priests must serve daily, repeatedly offering their sacrifices (10:11). Their work is never finished

because their offering cannot permanently end sin. They are shadows.

But Jesus offered one offering for all time and sat down at the right hand of God (10:12). His work is complete. It is effectual. It is eternal. Yet note that though the work is complete, it is not fully realized. He is still waiting for his enemies to be made a footstool for his feet (10:13). This is similar to what the author said in chapter two: “Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him” (2:8). Similarly, he says that Christ has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified (10:14). We are still in the process of being made holy, but his work on the cross is finished, ensuring our complete salvation. What is to come is our perfection, in which we no longer sin.

10:15-17

For the second time, our author quotes Jeremiah 31, though much abbreviated from his quote in chapter eight.

And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,” then he adds, “I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more” (10:15–17).

In the new covenant, God’s laws will be written on our hearts and minds, and he will remember our sins and lawless deeds no more. In Hebrew, the word for remember is *זכר* (*zkhr*), and means not only to call to mind but to act upon. For example, God “remembers” Rachel (Genesis 30:22) and Hannah (1 Samuel 1:19-20), and opens their wombs to bear children. He “remembers” his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and so rescues the Israelites from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 2:23-24).

In the new covenant, God will not remember our sins and lawless deeds. He will not act upon them. At present, does God act upon our sins? In one sense, he does not, because he forgives us and does not destine us for wrath (Ephesians 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:9). He has already dealt with sin (Hebrews 9:28). But in another sense, he does not leave our sins alone. He disciplines us, correcting us and sanctifying us. In fact, the author of Hebrews teaches his readers that God disciplines and reproves his children (12:3-11). Likewise, Jesus himself says to the church in Laodicea: “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent” (Revelation 3:19). As long as we still sin, God will “remember” our sins, disciplining us and training us to become like Christ.

Throughout the letter of Hebrews, the author has depicted a tension between the old covenant and the new covenant, the present age and the age to come. The old covenant is obsolete because of Christ’s finished work, but it is becoming obsolete because we are not yet made perfect (8:13). Likewise the new covenant has been initiated and guaranteed through our perfect high priest (7:22), but is it fully realized? Is the law written on our hearts and minds? Some commentators such as Cockerill seem to affirm this:

[W]e live during the time “after those days” in which God promised that he would establish his New Covenant. We are the privileged heirs who live in the time of fulfillment. How important perseverance is for those who have received such benefits (456).

But is this the Christian experience, and moreover, does the Bible affirm this? Right now, we are still growing into maturity. Paul writes:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love (Ephesians 4:11–16).

Similarly, Paul tells us that we must be transformed by the renewal of our minds so that we can discern the perfect will of God (Rom 12:2). Right now, we are being transformed, becoming more and more like Christ and better able to discern God’s perfect will. The fact that we are being transformed shows that we have not yet arrived at perfection. Further, Paul says, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known (1 Corinthians 13:12). While on this earth, we are waiting for the fullness that is to come.

The Jeremiah 31 new covenant also states,

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 (Jeremiah 31:34; cf. Hebrews 8:11).

But the New Testament teaches that we still need teachers. Ephesians 4:11 quoted above tells us that God gives us shepherds and teachers to build up the body to maturity. Paul encourages Timothy to “teach and urge these things” (1 Timothy 6:2b). The epistles at large are written by apostles, giving instruction to various churches and believers. Yet during the new covenant described by Jeremiah, we will have no need of teachers. We will fully know and be known by God.

When Christ returns, we will receive new, spiritual bodies. Paul describes these bodies in 1 Corinthians 15:

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the

second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven (1 Corinthians 15:42–49).

New Testament scholar Gordon D. Fee comments on this passage, describing the difference between the natural body and the spiritual body:

The transformed body, therefore, is not composed of “spirit”; it is a body adapted to the eschatological existence that is under the ultimate domination of the Spirit. Thus for Paul, to be truly *pneumatikos* is to bear the likeness of Christ (v. 49) in a transformed body, fitted for the new age (786).

At the resurrection, our new bodies will be Spirit-dominated, always having the inclination to do the will of God. This sounds much like the description of those in the new covenant, who have God’s laws ingrained on their hearts and minds. We will no longer have a desire to sin, but will be like Christ.

Right now, we await our future salvation (9:28). We await the fullness of the new covenant, in which God will write his laws on our hearts and minds. We will no longer have need for teachers but each of us will know the Lord. We will have perfect, spiritual bodies that bear the image of Jesus. And God will remember our sins no more because we will no longer have a sinful nature with its inclination to sin.

10:18

Following his quote of Jeremiah 31, the author of Hebrews declares, “Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin” (10:18). The common understanding of this verse is that after Christ’s effectual offering, there is no need for further animal sacrifices.

Ellingworth agrees, saying, “Christ’s sacrifice achieves its end in the forgiveness of sins; animal sacrifice has no further rôle” (514). But what of the many passages we mentioned earlier that tell of a continuing role for the Levitical priests (Numbers 25:10–13; Jeremiah 33:17–22; Ezekiel 44:15–31; Isaiah 66:21)?

Furthermore, there are many Old Testament prophecies that describe future animal sacrifices. Ezekiel 40 through 48 describes a future temple in which the Levites function as priests and offer sacrifices. Zechariah speaks of a time after the Day of the Lord, during the millennium, in which the nations participate in the Feast of Booths and bring their sacrifices (Zechariah 14:16–21). As mentioned above, Jeremiah 33:17–18 says,

For thus says the LORD: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence **to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to make sacrifices forever** (emphasis ours).

How can we reconcile these passages with Hebrews 10:18?

Lane states, “Where sins have been decisively purged or put away, there is no further need for a sin offering” (269). We agree with Lane and find reconciliation between Hebrews 10:18 and the many passages that speak of future Levites and animal sacrifices. He writes, “Where sins have been *decisively purged or put away*, there is *no further need ...*” (emphasis ours).

We have already presented the argument that the Jeremiah 31 covenant, though inaugurated through Christ, is future in fulfillment. Therefore, let’s understand verse eighteen in the same framework. It refers to a time yet future. In the age to come, there is no longer any sin offering because we will no longer sin. If our sinful natures have perished and sin is permanently gone, what need will there be for a sin offering? It is not that God has changed his mind about sin and the regulations regarding sin (i.e. sacrifices). Rather, we know God’s Word is eternal and he does not change. His commands are good. But the commands that deal with sin will no longer be relevant.

This idea is not foreign to the Torah. Some say there are as many as 613 commandments, but not all 613 apply to every person. Some are only for women, and thus are not relevant for men. Some are only for priests, and thus do not apply to those who are not. And some laws are only for those who have sinned. If we do not sin, they do not apply. A time is coming when we will receive new bodies, free from sinful natures. When we no longer sin, the sin sacrifices will no longer be relevant. “Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin” (10:18).

Consider the implications of this passage, “Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.” Christ’s sacrifice is so effective in the complete forgiveness that it provides, it actually causes us to cease sinning. It puts away sin (9:26), meaning that our sins are not only forgiven but also, and ultimately, that our sinning ceases. How can this be? It is because we will be given new bodies with a spiritual nature instead of a sinful nature. This is the promise of the new covenant. This is how it will be possible for the law, the Torah, to be written on our hearts and minds. It is just another way of saying we will have a spiritual nature. So this final and complete forgiveness that verse 18 is talking about comes at the moment when our bodies are made new at the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:52). Above we discussed Hebrews 10:2: “Otherwise, would [sacrifices] not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins?” We see now that it is at this future point when the sacrifices will completely cease to be offered since the worshipers will no longer be conscious of sin because we will not sin.

A Second Look at 10:9

We return to Hebrews 10:9: “He does away with the first in order to establish the second.” Christ has done away with the first, which in context is animal sacrifices and offerings, in order to firmly establish (*histēmi*) the second, the doing of God’s will. Now that we understand the future framework of the new covenant, we can rightly interpret the author’s message. The animal sacrifices are done away with

because they are no longer relevant. This is critical to understand. God has not changed his mind or altered his commands. They remain the same. But the commands regarding sin are simply not applicable when there is no sin. The doing of God's will is established, for we perfectly will do his will, just as Christ did. Our new bodies will have a spiritual nature whose inclination is to do God's will. There will no longer be the battle between the Spirit and the flesh (Romans 7). The desire to sin will be gone with the shedding of our natural bodies. Our hearts long for this day.

Questions to Consider

Should we offer animal sacrifices right now?

The answer to this question is found in Deuteronomy 12:13-14, which says,

Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place that you see, but at the place that the LORD will choose in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I am commanding you.

God tells us that we may only offer sacrifices in the tabernacle or temple, in the place where he causes his name to dwell. There is currently no temple, and thus we should not offer animal sacrifices. When the temple is rebuilt, animal sacrifices will rightly resume.

Why are there animal sacrifices during the millennium, as Ezekiel and other passages suggest?

While there are a variety of views on the millennium, we are approaching this from a pre-millennial, literal thousand year perspective, which we feel is most consistent with Scripture. (Pre-millennial refers to the view that Jesus will return prior to his one thousand year reign on earth. For more about this position, see Blaising, Gentry, and Strimple's work, *Counterpoints: Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*.) At that time we will have our new bodies and will no longer sin. Therefore, for us, the animal sacrifices will be obsolete. However, there will be those living on the earth who still have a sinful nature. In speaking of this time, Isaiah says,

No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the young man shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed (Isaiah 65:20).

In this passage we see people with earthly bodies and sinful natures who are born, live, and die. Because they still have sinful natures, there will still be a need for animal sacrifices. When they sin, they will follow the regulations of the law regarding sin at the earthly temple.

When will the age of the Levitical priesthood be finished and the animal sacrifices cease to be offered?

We have established that the Levitical priesthood brings external purification to our earthly bodies, but cannot cleanse our spirits (cf. 9:9-10,13-14). There will be a time when we shed these bodies and

receive new bodies with a spiritual inclination (1 Corinthians 15:42–49). For believers, this occurs when Christ returns, but others living during the millennium will still have their fleshly bodies. Therefore, the Levitical priesthood will still be functioning on earth. When there comes a time that all people are free of sin and no longer have a sinful nature, then the age of the Levites will be ended. Based on the millennial passages such as Isaiah 65:20 discussed in the previous question, we know this age is beyond the millennium, but we know little more than that.

Do post-Christ animal sacrifices negate his work?

No. The animal sacrifices could not do what Jesus did. Remember Hebrews 10:4, which states that it is impossible for the blood of animals to take away sin. When the temple was still standing, the sacrifices acted as shadows. They pointed forward to the greater sacrifice of Christ. The need to repeatedly offer them created a longing for the eternal, once-for-all atonement that Jesus would accomplish on the cross.

In the future when sacrifices are re-instituted, they will not serve as a replacement but as a reminder of the work of Christ. This is similar to how we take communion in remembrance of what Jesus did for us. When a person brings a lamb or goat and its blood is spilled, it will be a reminder of the blood that Jesus spilled for us.

Further, if it were wrong to sacrifice animals after the cross, then Paul, James, and the elders of the church in Jerusalem were in the wrong in the book of Acts. In Acts 21:17-26, Paul returns to Jerusalem and is greeted by James and the elders. They inform Paul of many believing Jews who have been told false accusations against Paul, that he teaches against following the Torah. To counteract this misrepresentation, James tells him,

We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law (Acts 21:23–24).

The only vow in the Torah that matches this description is the Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:13-20), which includes the giving of a burnt offering, a sin offering, and a peace offering. Paul listens to James' advice:

Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them (Acts 21:26).

Paul participated in the purification process and the temple rites, including animal sacrifices. We maintain that Paul did not negate the work of his Savior when doing these things, but rather understood that Christ's sacrifice is the reality of these shadows.

10:19-25

The writer now rightly follows his rich theology with application:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (10:19-25).

Although we have not yet received the fulfillment of our salvation, our hope is sure and we can draw near to God with confidence. God is faithful, and so we can trust in his promises. While we wait for “the Day,” we are to continually meet together and encourage each other. We need this encouragement because of the “not yet”—because of the promises of God that we have not yet received.

10:26-39

The writer of Hebrews has repeatedly urged his readers not to turn away from the truth of Christ and the hope of salvation that awaits them. Now he gives perhaps the sternest warning of all:

For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (10:26–31).

The author began his letter by showing the superiority of Christ over angels, Moses, and the Levitical priesthood. It is not that those things are done away, but rather they are shadows and pointers to the work of Christ. Here again we see a comparison between the law and the Son of God. The argument is as follows: Those who set aside the law of Moses die without mercy. The Son of God is superior to the law of Moses. Therefore, if you set aside (reject) Jesus, you will have an even greater punishment than rejecting the law (eternal death).

There are some tense differences in the various English translations of 10:28. Some translations such as ESV and NASB have the verbs in present tense:

“Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses **dies** without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” (ESV)

“Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses **dies** without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.” (NASB)

However, the NIV and NET Bibles put the verbs in the past tense, which suggest that the law of Moses was authoritative only in the past:

“Anyone who rejected the law of Moses **died** without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.” (NIV)

“Someone who rejected the law of Moses **was put to death** without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.” (NET)

We think translations such as the first two are truer to the Greek because the Greek verb is in the present tense. The NET translation even includes a note that “was put to death” is actually “dies” in the Greek. So while it may seem from the latter two translations that the law of Moses was only applicable in the past and is no longer, the Greek suggests otherwise.

Many have interpreted various passages in Hebrews to say the law is done away with, yet here we see the author upholds the law, while still showing that Christ is superior. According to him, we are to die if we set aside the law of Moses. The Greek word for “set aside” is ἀθετέω (*atheteo*) and means to reject something as invalid, to nullify, or to ignore (BDAG, 24). It is the verb form of the same word used as a noun in 7:18: “For on the one hand, a former commandment is *set aside* because of its weakness and uselessness.” In 7:18, “set aside” is a noun in the Greek, ἀθέτησις (*athetesis*), which, as we already discussed in 7:18, means a refusal to recognize the validity of something; an annulment (ibid).

If in 7:18 the author meant that the Torah and specifically the Levitical priesthood has been “set aside,” he now would be contradicting himself and, according to his own words, would be worthy of death for setting aside the law of Moses. But recall that he is not advocating the end of the Torah or even the end of the Levitical priesthood. Rather, as we argue in our discussion of 7:18, what has been set aside is the need for Jesus to be a descendent of Levi because Jesus functions as high priest of a completely different priesthood with much greater stipulations: an indestructible life.

Here, the writer of Hebrews stresses yet another time that we must not reject our great high priest. If we do, we no longer have the sure hope and promise of salvation but rather judgment and destruction. The chapter ends with encouragement to endure:

But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your

confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, “Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.” But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls (10:32–39).

Note the continuing themes: that we have a better, abiding possession that awaits us, that there is a great reward for our confidence, that we will receive what is promised after we have done the will of God. Therefore, we must walk in faith and confidence, which brings us to chapter eleven, the great faith Hall of Fame.

11:1-39

In this chapter, the author gives example after example of men and women who walked in faith in the promises of God. He begins with a definition of faith: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation” (11:1–2). Note that faith is the assurance of things we hope for and do not yet see. In other words, we do not yet have what has been promised, but we walk in full assurance that we will have it. This is an entire chapter showing the prominent “already-not yet” theme of Hebrews.

After discussing Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah, the author of Hebrews writes,

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city (11:13–16).

These men and women did not receive the promises, just like we have not yet received our final salvation. They saw them from “afar,” just as we do. They looked forward to the heavenly city, just as we do. They pressed on, in spite of tribulation, so sure were they that they would receive their inheritance:

Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— of whom the world was not worthy— wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect (11:36–40).

Likewise, the writer encourages his readers to press on in faith, not turning away from their Messiah but approaching him with confidence.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 encourages us to live in light of what was just shared in chapter 11 – that we have a great cloud of witnesses who have endured immense difficulty and pressed on in faith, not having yet received the promise but believing in full assurance that they would. So we too must run with endurance, not giving up, never turning back to life before we knew Jesus, knowing that we too will receive what has been promised to us if we endure to the end.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted (12:1–3).

Our example of perseverance is ultimately Jesus himself. We are to consider what he endured and how he is now seated at the right hand of the Father. His example encourages us so that we will not grow weary amidst persecution.

In 12:5-11, the author reminds us that all sons receive discipline and training from their fathers, and so God as a good father disciplines us because he loves us. While the discipline may seem painful in the moment, it later yields the fruit of righteousness. The author’s purpose is again to encourage his readers to endure their painful trial instead of turning away from the Messiah. He continues,

Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God (12:12–15).

We can hear the author urging his readers, “Do not give up! The trial is hard but it will yield such a reward. Press on! If you turn back, you will not obtain your inheritance!”

In 12:18 and again in 12:22, we come to the last two uses of “draw near” (*proserchomai*) in Hebrews, a verb we are quite familiar with by now as it has already been used five times before this point. In chapter 12 the ESV translates *proserchomai* as “come.”

For you have not **come** to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” But you have **come** to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new

covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (12:18-24, emphasis ours).

The first use of “come” in verse 22 tells what we have *not* come to. The author alludes to a specific event: the giving of the law at Sinai, as recorded in Exodus 20:18-21. He is referencing a specific moment in history – albeit a terrifying moment – and his point is that we were not present there. We didn’t see the fire, or hear the trumpet and God’s awesome voice. Rather, what we have come to is Mount Zion (verse 25). Contextually this is not the physical mountain in Jerusalem, but rather the heavenly Jerusalem, as specified in the same verse.

Some interpret these verses to mean that since we have not come to Mount Sinai, then we no longer should obey the commandments given at Sinai, i.e. the Mosaic Law. Is this what the author is trying to say? What point is he making?

Commentators agree that the author is using an *a fortiori* comparison, which is Latin for “from the stronger” (Ellingworth, 137). This is also known as a “lesser to greater” argument, in which the writer argues from a lesser to a greater situation, arguing that if the lesser is the case, how much more will the greater be the case. For this reason, it is also sometimes referred to as a “how much more” argument. If something can be affirmed in the lesser scenario, then it can be affirmed in the greater scenario with even more force. This is a very common argument in the book of Hebrews. The author has already used it in 2:1-4; 9:13-14; 10:26-31, and 12:9, and he employs it again here.

Before examining the *a fortiori* comparison in the passage, let’s consider some examples.

An Everyday Life Example:

If I do not trust you to take care of my dog, I will not trust you to take care of my children.

Lesser Scenario: You are not to be trusted with my animal.

Greater Scenario: How much more will I not trust you with my children.

We find *a fortiori* comparisons not just in Hebrews but throughout the Bible.

Old Testament Examples:

If the righteous is repaid on earth, how much more the wicked and the sinner! (Proverbs 11:31)

The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination; how much more when he brings it with evil intent (Proverbs 21:27).

And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity

Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (Jonah 4:10-11)

New Testament Examples:

[Jesus] said to them, “Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (Matthew 12:11-12).

“Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith!” (Luke 12:27-28)

He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32)

For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree (Romans 11:24).

These are just a few biblical examples, not to mention the many listed above found in the book of Hebrews. Now let’s look at our specific passage.

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens” (12:25–26).

The author argues that, though we were not present at the awesome event when the law was given at Sinai, we have come to something even more awesome! Even greater and more serious and awe-inspiring than the Exodus 20 account is the heavenly Jerusalem that we have been brought to. So, if those who turned away from God after Sinai did not escape judgment, how much more (*a fortiori* argument) will we not escape judgment if we now choose to turn away from Jesus, rejecting him. At Sinai the earth was shaken; but when God speaks again, both the heavens and the earth will be shaken! As Ellingworth comments, “God’s people now must be still holier than in the days of Moses, because they stand in a yet holier place than Sinai” (670).

The author is not trying to tell us we no longer have to obey the commandments given to Moses. He is simply not addressing that here. Rather, he is once again admonishing his readers that they must not turn away from Jesus, for what they have come to is far more serious and awesome than the giving of the law at Sinai. They must stand firm in their walk of faith and “offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (12:28b). This is wholly consistent with the overall message of the book of Hebrews: do not turn back to life without Jesus.

Chapter 13

The author opens chapter 13 with several imperatives for how the readers should be living. They should practice brotherly love (1), show hospitality (2), remember those in prison and those who are mistreated (3), remain faithful in marriage (4), and stay free from the love of money (5a). He reminds the readers of the promise that God will never leave them or forsake them, so they have nothing to fear (5b-6).

In verse 7, he tells his readers to look to their teachers as examples: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” They are to look to these teachers as examples – we can infer that such teachers have endured difficulties and remained true to Jesus, and so the readers should do likewise.

We then move into one more passage that seems to suggest the law and specifically the animal sacrifices are done away with:

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. (13:8-10).

It is helpful to read this in light of Hebrews as a whole. The author has already spent a considerable amount of time showing that the current Levitical system is for this earth, is ready to pass away, and will one day be obsolete (8:13). In contrast, the promises of the new covenant are eternal because the work of Christ is eternally efficacious (9:12). The work of Christ is lasting and eternal, just as he is unchanging – the same yesterday, today, and forever (13:8). Unlike the Levitical system, he remains forever.

With this in mind, the author reminds his first-century readers that their focus should not be on the earthly temple, including its foods (i.e. the animal sacrifices) because they are limited to this earthly life. A time is coming when this earth and all things related to it, including the earthly temple, will pass away. Believers will have new, sinless natures and bodies with no need for the earthly tabernacle. Rather, we should focus on the heavenly altar, which strengthens us by grace because it is based on the permanent, lasting work of Christ on our behalf. Recall that the one does not replace the other, but rather that they have different locations, purposes, and time frames. The earthly priesthood and its sacrifices are for this earth and point to the eternal priesthood of Christ. His heavenly priesthood is far superior to the earthly and will remain forever.

Within this comparison, the author reminds his readers to endure suffering, just as Jesus did. We are to bear the reproach that he endured:

For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the

gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God (13:11-16).

Again, there is a contrast between what is temporary and what is lasting. We can endure suffering because we seek the eternal city that is to come. Our present state will pass away. Our response is to offer to God right sacrifices that please him – that is, praising him at all times, acknowledging Jesus (as opposed to denying and turning away from him), and doing good to others. These are the sacrifices with eternal repercussions. This does not mean that animal sacrifices are gone and done, but simply that they are limited to this earth and will pass away, and the focus should be on what is eternal.

The author continues with a few closing remarks and requests for prayer, and then gives this blessing:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen (13:20-21).

Within this blessing, the same themes emerge: Jesus is worthy of our lives, and the covenant we are a part of through him is eternal. We have a sure hope, and so we press on to obtain that which he has promised to us, and he equips us along the way, helping us to endure as we make our steady journey to the eternal city, the heavenly Jerusalem.

Conclusion

Let's recap our journey through the book of Hebrews. The author writes to encourage his audience not to fall away from their faith in the Messiah. He begins by establishing the supremacy of Christ over all things. He is the Creator of the universe and is superior to the angels, to Moses, and to the Levitical priesthood. Simply put, there is nothing greater than Christ to turn to. He is above all things. If we forsake him, there is nothing left for us.

The author introduces Jesus as our great high priest, beginning in chapters four, five, and six, and then more fully explains his priesthood in chapter seven. As our high priest, Jesus is able to represent us because he is fully human. He can help us through our trials and temptations, having endured them himself. Through him, we can draw near to the throne of grace to receive mercy. Jesus' high priesthood is of the order of Melchizedek, not Levi. Using the Torah as his basis, the author shows that the priesthood of Melchizedek is superior to that of Levi, for it was Melchizedek who blessed Abraham, and Abraham tithed unto him (7:1-10).

The author then demonstrates the insufficiency of the Levitical priesthood to bring about perfection (7:11-14). The atonement through the animal sacrifices offered by the Levites was temporary and

limited. In other words, the sacrifices could not bring a definitive end to sin, and thus awakened a longing in our hearts for an effectual sacrifice.

It is not that the Levitical priesthood failed at its purpose. Rather, it had a different purpose: not to bring perfection and an end to sin, but to temporarily deal with sin and point to the greater sacrifice of the Messiah.

The author of Hebrews spends considerable time establishing the validity of Jesus as high priest. He is not a Levitical priest, nor could he be, for Jesus is not a descendent of Aaron, and he does not function as a priest on earth, but rather a high priest in heaven (cf. 8:1-5). Therefore, there is a change in the law (7:12) because Jesus' high priesthood is based on different criteria than the Levitical priesthood. Jesus' priesthood is based on a greater requirement, that he has an indestructible life and lives forever as our high priest (7:15-19). Therefore the requirement that Jesus be from Levi is "set aside" as it relates to Christ, and a better hope of perfection is introduced.

Recall that God has not taken the Levitical priesthood and altered it so that now Jesus can somehow function as a high priest. The Levitical priesthood remains as it was, with its same purpose, to function as priests on earth during the present age, pointing to the work of Christ. God has not set aside or annulled the Levitical priesthood, but rather, has introduced Jesus as a high priest of a superior order.

The author of Hebrews continues to show the superiority of Jesus as high priest through the remainder of chapter seven, showing that Jesus is an eternal and effective high priest. Unlike the Levitical priests, he will never die and thus continually holds his office. Furthermore, he is sinless, and thus offered a perfect sacrifice, which is able to completely save us for all time.

Moreover, Jesus' priesthood is superior because it is enacted on the better promises of the new covenant described in Jeremiah 31 (8:6-13). Under the new covenant, God's laws will be written on our hearts and minds. We will have no need of teachers but will each know God intimately and fully, and he will remember our sins no more. The Levitical priesthood could not accomplish any of these things, nor was it designed to.

The author of Hebrews wrestles with the tension of the two priesthoods, the two covenants, and their place in history: we have received a sure hope of the new covenant promises based on the work of Christ, yet we are still on this earth and striving against our flesh. Thus, the old covenant is becoming obsolete and is ready to pass away, but it has not yet fully (8:13). We are in the "already-not yet" state, in which we have promises so sure, it is as if we have received them in full, but we have not. With the effective work of Christ, the inauguration of the new covenant has occurred, but the consummation of the new covenant is yet future.

For this reason, the author connects the "present age" with the earthly temple and its regulations (9:1-10). In other words, the law, including the Levitical priesthood and animal sacrifices, is still applicable

at present, until a future age of reformation. The former deals with an external purification of the flesh (9:10,13), while the latter is able to bring purification of our spirits, in which we will be perfected and without sin (9:14). When Christ returns and ushers in the age of reformation, then we will receive the fullness of our salvation (9:28), and we will truly be sinless and perfect. Christ's effective offering thus ultimately plays out in our receiving new, spiritual bodies. We will be cleansed of sin because we will be cleansed of a sinful nature.

In chapter ten, the author returns to the Jeremiah 31 passage for a second time. Unlike the animal sacrifices under the law, which can never take away sins, Jesus offered a single, effectual sacrifice, which perfected for all time those who are being sanctified (10:11-14). Under the new covenant promises, we will experience the full reality of this hope. We will truly be perfect, with God's laws on our hearts and minds (10:16). God will remember our sins no more (10:17)—he will not act upon our sins because we will be without sin. This is the age of reformation that all of faith have looked forward to since the fall. This is the age of the fullness of the new covenant promises.

Under the new covenant, there is no longer any offering for sin (10:18), not because God has changed his law, for his Word is eternal, but because those specific laws will no longer be relevant. If we do not sin, there will be no need for sin offerings. He has done away with the first (animal sacrifices) in order to establish the second (doing God's will) (10:9). The perfect doing of God's will is established when Christ returns and we receive our new bodies, free of a sinful nature. Thus, the animal sacrifices are done away with because they will no longer apply to us.

The author is so confident of this future hope that he writes about it almost as if it were present. This is how people of faith throughout time have responded to God's promises (Hebrews 11). Because of our sure hope, we can draw near to God with confidence. We have an abiding possession, a great reward in store, an eternal inheritance. Therefore, we press on to obtain that which has been guaranteed by Christ.

In the last couple chapters of his letter, the author continues to admonish his readers to press on in faithfulness. He reminds them of the seriousness of the event at Sinai when God gave the law, and stresses that our coming to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, is far more serious. Therefore, we should not turn away from Jesus but endure any difficulty that comes our way.

With these key ideas in mind, we are able to evaluate the traditional interpretation of Hebrews, which claims the Old Testament ceremonial laws ended when Christ offered himself on the cross as a superior sacrifice. The writer of Hebrews confidently declares that the laws related to sin will pass away, specifically the Levitical priests offering animal sacrifices. We join him in this confidence, but recognize along with him, that the full reality of this is yet future. It will happen, to be sure. But it has not happened yet. Thus, the author of Hebrews speaks of the "present age," in which we still sin and operate in the realm of shadows. At the same time, he claims the truth of "the age to come" and looks forward to our complete salvation. We will have new bodies with spiritual natures that always do God's will. At that time, the old covenant and its regulations regarding sin are not cancelled, but are simply no

longer relevant.

Together with the author of Hebrews, we long for this time with great expectation and confidence.

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