

The writer's reason for establishing Melchizedek's superiority over Abraham and Levi had nothing to do with those two men *per se*, but with what they represented. Though Abraham enjoyed the unique preeminence of being God's chosen instrument for accomplishing His work of creational renewal, *Melchizedek transcended him*. Their interaction in the King's Valley, set in the context of Abram's astonishing triumph as God's covenant man, suggested that his singular greatness in God's purposes was overarched by the greatness and ministration of another – one who himself was unique as God's king-priest. God had established His covenant with Abram, but He affirmed and blessed that relationship through His regal priest, *a man whose priesthood and priestly distinction existed outside the covenant with Abram, and yet affirmed it and served its ends*. This dynamic is key to the way the writer viewed Melchizedek's superiority over Levi, and so also the superiority of his priesthood. This is the subject of the balance of chapter 7.

This passage is dense and multifaceted, but in an organic way. Thus it cannot be neatly partitioned into logical or thematic elements. But it does follow a certain flow, arguing from the general to the specific, and this allows it to be treated in two sections. The first section deals with the general relationship between the Levitical and Melchizedekian priesthoods and the covenants associated with them (7:11-19), while the second looks more closely at the differences between the two priesthoods and the priestly men who administer them (7:20-28).

- c. The fundamental thesis in the first section is that there exists an intrinsic relationship between the Sinai Covenant and the Levitical priesthood. In the writer's words, it was on the basis of this priesthood that Israel received the Law (i.e., the covenant at Sinai; 7:11). Specifically, God ordained the Levitical priesthood to mediate His covenant relationship with Israel, both in terms of instruction and remediation. The Law of Moses bound Israel to Yahweh as covenant son to covenant Father, and this Father-son relationship (which the Law defined and prescribed) was to be administered and upheld by a priestly system. Israel's priests stood between God and His people, and their ministration – Godward and manward – was vital to the covenant relationship and its continuance.

The reason this was the case is that the covenant bound together *estranged* entities. It established a Father-son relationship, but one that was only defined and prescribed, not actually realized. Israel was Yahweh's son in name only – a people elected to sonship (in Abraham) and commanded to fulfill their election on behalf of the world, yet unable to do so. God had covenanted with unbelieving and unfaithful people incapable of loving Him, and only a mediating priestly system could hold things together. But even so, this system couldn't solve the problem it was ordained to address, for the mediators themselves shared the same estrangement from God as those they interceded for. So far from bringing together Father and son in the intimate communion the Law prescribed, Israel's priests only perpetuated – and even exacerbated – the alienation between them.

Thus the Sinai Covenant (Law of Moses) had the Levitical priesthood as its foundational premise; indeed, the writer recognized that this priestly system was absolutely essential. There could be no covenant relationship between Yahweh and Abraham's descendents without some mediating agency, because such a relationship demanded that the alienation existing between them be managed and mitigated.

The existence and continuance of a covenant relationship between God and Israel depended on a system of mediation, but this is not to say that the Levitical priesthood – which God Himself ordained and defined – brought success to the covenant relationship. In fact, the Hebrews writer argued for just the opposite, and he pointed to Melchizedek and the promise of Psalm 110 to make his case. Psalm 110 promised a future priest-king according to the order of Melchizedek, and this promise was sufficient in itself to prove the impermanence and imperfection of the Levitical priesthood, and so also the covenant it oversaw. His logic was simple and straightforward:

*If God intended “perfection” to come through the Levitical priesthood (“perfection” being the realization of a perfect relationship between Himself and Abraham’s offspring as defined and prescribed by the covenant), then why would He promise another priest according to an entirely different priestly order?*

The writer proposed this perfect outcome as a hypothetical, but with the understanding that what he proposed was contrary to fact – God *hadn't* intended the Levitical priesthood to be the instrument of covenant perfection. Indeed, the mere fact that He promised a new priestly order proved that the old order was “imperfect.” But it wasn't imperfect in the sense of being misconceived, malformed, or misdirected; rather, it was *non-ultimate*. God ordained and devised the Levitical priestly ministration, and it was absolutely perfect according to its design. But it was designed to be preparatory, and thus impermanent; God never intended that it would actually bring to pass that which it attested and served. The Levitical priestly system was a signifier that pointed forward to a counterpart that is ultimate and effectual, and therefore everlasting: a priesthood and ministration represented in the salvation history by Melchizedek.

But the promise of a new priestly order carried an even more significant implication: Because the Sinai Covenant was founded on the Levitical priesthood, the passing of that priesthood and its ministration meant the passing away of the covenant itself; a new priesthood would bring about a new covenant. This is what the writer meant by the phrase, “change of law” (7:12). He wasn't talking about a new legal code or set of precepts and commandments, but a new *Torah*: a new definition and administration of covenant relationship between God and His human image-bearers.

The Hebrews writer recognized that a new and distinct priestly order implies a new and distinct covenant, but this conclusion was more than merely a logical inference. It's substantiated by the *nature* of this new priesthood – specifically the fact that it is a regal priesthood. *It is a ministration in which kingship and priesthood are merged together, and not for a season, but everlastingly.* This is the preeminent reason that this new priesthood necessarily ended the previous covenant and inaugurated a new one; the Sinai Covenant overtly and absolutely precluded the idea of a priest-king. This the subject of verses 12-17.

The Sinai Covenant (Law of Moses) ratified with Abraham's descendents the covenant relationship God had established with Abram himself (cf. Genesis 15 with Exodus 3:1-17, 6:1-8). Thus the Law of Moses interacted with Israel according to its Abrahamic origin and structure as twelve tribes descended from Jacob. (Jacob was the progenitor of the nation of Israel as the *man* Israel; cf. Genesis 32:24-28, 35:9-26). And part of God's ordering of Israel was His ordination of distinct tribes to fulfill Israel's priestly and regal functions as His elect image-son. The priestly function was assigned to *Levi* (ref. Numbers 1:47-53, 3:5-12, also 26:52-59), while the regal one was assigned to *Judah*. The covenant specified Levi as the priestly tribe, but it was Jacob who identified the kingly tribe when, centuries earlier, he blessed his sons just before his death (Genesis 49:1-10). Jacob's pronouncement that the scepter belonged to Judah stood intact throughout the succeeding generations, even after Israel received the covenant at Sinai and entered the land, until at last the nation became a monarchy and Judah's descendent David assumed the throne (1 Chronicles 2:1-15).

Thus the Law of Moses established an unbridgeable chasm between the kingship and priesthood in Israel. No Israelite could ever hold the title of king-priest, for it's impossible to be descended from two brothers. God reinforced this distinction by punishing those who sought to blur or ignore it. King Saul and King Uzziah both usurped the priestly function, and both paid dearly for it (ref. 1 Samuel 13:5-14; 2 Chronicles 26:1-21). The notable (and sole) exception to this was David, whose priestly ministration as Yahweh's king was acceptable to Him because of his unique significance. David was the great prototype of the coming Messiah, and so it was necessary that he enthrone Yahweh on Mount Zion as a priest-king (2 Samuel 6), because this was the way his messianic descendent would establish God's everlasting reign.

The Law separated the kingship and the priesthood, and thus the Hebrews writer insisted that Jesus' priesthood, as a descendent of Judah, necessarily existed outside of, and even contradicted, the Sinai Covenant under which He was born (7:13-14; cf. 8:1-4). If He was indeed a priest, then He was a priest of a different order, and a new priestly order indicated the end of the former order and the covenant it supported and administered.

Jesus, the descendent of Judah, *is* a priest, and therefore a priest who is not of the Levitical order. The obvious difference in His priesthood is that it merges together the regal and priestly offices and functions. This is evident from Jesus' genealogy, but also from the fact that this priestly order has its prototype in Melchizedek, God's archetypal king-priest. David's priestly actions and prophetic words (Psalm 110) hinted at this merging, especially when viewed through the lens of the covenant God made with him (2 Samuel 7). But it was Zechariah's prophecy hundreds of years later that explicitly declared God's intent to bring the kingship and priesthood together in David's messianic offspring (Zechariah 6:9-15). The Branch of David would establish and build Yahweh's everlasting kingdom, but He would do so as a priest upon His throne.

This alone should have told the Israelite people that the priesthood and covenant structure established at Sinai were "imperfect" – i.e., non-ultimate and appointed to pass away with the coming of the Messiah and the messianic kingdom. *And this, in turn, indicated that the renewal God had been promising from the beginning wouldn't involve resurrecting the Israelite theocracy and David's throne and kingdom in their previous form.* When Yahweh restored David's regal house and set the Branch on David's throne, it would be to establish His reign over a new sort of kingdom – a kingdom of renewal that would fill the earth (Isaiah 11:1-12).

This new, boundless and everlasting kingdom called for a king suited to it. His reign was to encompass all peoples, tribes, nations and kingdoms, and he needed to be a man characterized by the kingdom traits of righteousness, renewed life, spiritual wisdom and power, and perfect intimacy with the supreme King Himself (Psalm 45:1-7; Isaiah 9:1-7, 42:1-7, 61:1-3; Jeremiah 23:1-6, 33:14-16). And being a king-*priest*, these same qualities would have to characterize his priestly ministration. Thus he needed to be a different sort of priest, one whose priesthood and ministration fully realized what the Levitical order only hinted at. He was to obtain his priesthood, not on the basis of a law of fleshly requirement, but in accordance with "the power of an indestructible life" (7:15-17).

The imperfection of the Sinai Covenant was indicated by the imperfection of the priesthood ordained to administer it. For all the intricacies of its ministration and the persistence of its ministers, the Levitical system couldn't secure the Father-son relationship held out and demanded by the covenant. The priests mediated that relationship, but as men who were themselves alienated from the God they represented and served. Thus the promise of a different priestly order indicted the existing Levitical order as weak and worthless, lacking both the strength and the ability to fulfill its mandate. But this was God's design, so that, at the appointed time, it should yield to that which it prefigured – a better priesthood that actually draws men to God in the sure confidence of a better hope (7:18-19).