

- d. After speaking to general issues pertaining to the two priesthoods and their covenantal significance, the writer turned his attention to the respective priests and their ministrations, explaining in summary fashion how Jesus' priestly ministration transcends His Levitical counterparts (7:20-28). The first point of distinction is that, unlike the Levitical priests, Jesus received His priestly ordination by means of a *divine oath*. This isn't to say that the Levitical order was a human innovation; it, too, was divinely determined and devised. But it originated as part of the Law of Moses, and the priests who served within it did so because they met a genealogical criterion – "the law of physical requirement" (7:16; cf. Exodus 28:1-29:9). Jesus, on the other hand, entered upon His priesthood on the basis of God's oath to David's regal and priestly Lord, as indicated by Psalm 110: "*Yahweh has sworn, and will not change His mind, you are a priest forever...*" (7:21).

Jesus' priesthood originated with an oath, not a directive. Moreover, this oath explicitly established both the perpetuity and the unique order of His priesthood. In this way, God's unique oath – *which He issued within the context of the Law of Moses* – pertained to a priesthood outside of the Law and entirely distinct from it; a priesthood that transcends the Law and its priestly order, and that endures beyond them. It is a new and everlasting priesthood that is the basis of a new covenant appropriate to it.

Yahweh's oath pledged a distinct, unending priesthood assigned permanently to a singular priest. In the fullness of the times, that oath found its object in Jesus the Messiah, the man who is uniquely David's son and lord (Matthew 22:41-45). The oath distinguished Jesus above all of Israel's priests, including Aaron himself, and the Hebrews writer recognized that this distinction applies to the corresponding covenant: *If priesthood is the basis of covenant* (v. 11), *so that a change of priesthood brings a corresponding change of covenant* (v. 12), *it follows that the oath which guaranteed a transcendent priest and priesthood also guaranteed a transcendent covenant*. And recognizing that Jesus is the embodiment of that oath, the writer could declare that He *Himself* is that guarantee of a superior covenant (7:21-22). If He embodies the everlasting new priesthood as its singular priest, Jesus is equally the surety that the new covenant grounded in His priesthood is also unchangeable and everlasting.

But the superiority of the new priesthood and its covenant goes beyond their constancy and perpetuity under the ministration of one high priest. They are better than their Mosaic counterparts because they are associated with a *better priest*. Because Jesus embodies both the better priesthood and the better covenant, it's not surprising that He Himself is characterized by the same two qualities of constancy and perpetuity: He is a priest forever, according to the unchanging order of Melchizedek. But these two qualities point to the preeminent way in which He is a better priest: Unlike His predecessors, Jesus is an *effectual* priest (7:23-28).

Israel's priests (and preeminently their high priests) were "saviors" in the sense that they remediated the failures and violations that undermined the people's relationship with God. Individually and collectively, Israel was an unfaithful and disobedient son, but God upheld His covenant with His son through the atoning and preserving intervention of His ordained priesthood (ref. the various offerings of Leviticus 1-7, along with the climactic, all-encompassing ministration of Yom Kippur). Israel's priests performed a "saving" ministration, but one that fell short; they couldn't reconcile and bind men to God *everlastingly*. There were two dimensions to this shortfall, both of which the writer addressed for his readers.

- 1) The first was the priests' *transience*. Every individual priest exercised his ministration for a season. Even if nothing else removed him from the priesthood, death eventually did. Therefore, death insured that no priest would be able to save forever those under his charge; his intercession, however effectual according to the provisions of the Law of Moses (cf. Leviticus 1:4, 4:20, 5:6, etc. with Philippians 3:6, 9), was only temporary (7:23-25).
- 2) The second dimension was the priests' personal *weakness* and *failure*. This flaw – and its implication for their role as "saviors" – was highlighted from the very beginning of the priesthood by the ritual of ordination. Though God personally identified Aaron and his sons as His first priests under the Levitical order, their priestly consecration and ordination involved a sacrifice of atonement (Leviticus 8). They brought sin and guilt with them into the priesthood, and then multiplied it in their personal priestly ministration (Leviticus 10:1-5; Numbers 12:1-11).

Israel's priests couldn't "save *forever*" those under their charge, both with respect to time and ultimacy: On the one hand, their mortality insured that their atoning intercession was *temporary*; on the other hand – and more significantly, their own personal corruption prevented their ministration from achieving a *conclusive* atonement. In a word, the Levitical priests, and thus the Levitical priestly order and system, were ineffectual. They illumined the concept of priesthood and God's design for it, and so instructed and guided the people they served. But they never achieved the end for which they existed; they never brought God and His image-children together in true communion. It is precisely at this point that the supremacy of the new and everlasting priest – the one God ordained with His own oath – is most gloriously revealed (7:23-28).

- Unlike His Levitical counterparts, Jesus is a *permanent* priest; His ministration is unbroken and everlasting. He "always lives to make intercession" for those under His charge, and so is "able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him" (vv. 23-25).

- But He is also a *flawless* priest, and that in two crucial respects. The first is more obvious, which is that He is “holy, innocent and undefiled, separated from sinners.” Jesus lived as a sinless man, but with a view to the ultimate goal of becoming *consummate* man – *man as God created him to be, by means of His resurrection and glorification*. Jesus is God’s human Priest-King, “exalted above the heavens,” and enthroned to administer God’s sovereign rule over His creation as true Image-Son (v. 26, ref. also 2:5-18, 4:14-16).
- Jesus has attained the human destiny of divine Image-Son, but by means of a human act that is absolutely unique in human history – an act that, more than any other, distinguishes Him from every priest before and since. Before assuming His dominion as Great High Priest, Jesus abased Himself to become the *atonement sacrifice* for mankind (v. 27). His priesthood originated in His Father’s oath, but it was realized through His willful, submissive self-giving. The Messiah who is the everlasting Priest-King according to Yahweh’s sworn decree was first the priestly sacrifice (9:11-12, 10:1-14).

No priest in Israel could claim the title of priest-king, but even more importantly, no such priest ever offered *himself* on behalf of those he served. The obvious reason is that doing so would end his priesthood and ministration. Within the Levitical order, it was impossible that there should be an *abiding* priest who offered himself as a sacrifice. The finality of death precluded a self-giving Levitical priest, but the problem of priestly flaw was the more significant barrier. *How could a priest offer himself as an atoning sacrifice for others when he himself had need of such a sacrifice?*

Thus the writer’s summation of the distinction between the two priesthoods and their respective priests: The Law of Moses appointed Israel’s priests, but in the midst of that structure, the God who had given the Law interposed with an oath – an oath that pledged a priest and priesthood outside of the Law and transcendent in their duration, ministration, ultimacy, and effectuality. The Law and the oath each established a priestly ministration, but the former had no option but to designate men who were infirmed and incapable. Even if the Mosaic prescription had allowed for priests to be drawn from the entirety of mankind, this constraint would yet remain. And this constraint, in turn, compelled the oath to look elsewhere for its priest: A different order of priesthood demanded a different sort of human priest, one who is not impotent and ineffectual because of transience and weakness. Thus, while the Law appointed priests from within the sons of Israel – priests who, like their countrymen, were sons in name and calling only, the oath appointed a man who is a Son indeed: One who fulfilled the human vocation of sonship so as to be “made perfect forever,” and that on behalf of all men.