

2. The superiority of Jesus' priesthood is captured in the fact that He is uniquely a priest according to the order of Melchizedek: He is the singular King-Priest, performing His priestly ministration as the enthroned King of kings in the true sanctuary where God Himself presides as Lord over all. For their part, the Levitical priests ministered in a sanctuary where Yahweh was symbolically enthroned – the place where the heavenly and earthly realms intersected and from which God exercised His dominion in the world (cf. Psalm 80:1, 99:1, 132:7; Isaiah 66:1). They served the divine Lord and King in a symbolic throne room as consecrated priests; the Messiah performs His priestly work as sharing Yahweh's throne. The Levitical priests and their ministration was a matter of shadow and copy (8:4-5); Messiah's priesthood and ministration is the substance from which theirs derived and in which theirs has found its destiny and fulfillment.

Thus Jesus "has obtained a more excellent ministry" (8:6a). And yet, it isn't superior merely because it's untainted by sin, is more efficacious, and endures forever. Nor is it simply that it fulfills what the Levitical ministration portrayed and promised. All of that is true, but the real issue in the superiority of Jesus' priesthood and priestly ministration is what it embodies and represents: *It forms the essential core of God's realization of His eternal purposes for His creation, namely binding everything in His creation to Himself and His wise and loving lordship in and through man, His image-son.* That purpose, depicted in the structure and order of the original creation (Genesis 1-2), has become "yes and amen" in the new creation centered in the True Man – the regal and priestly Image-Son, Jesus the Messiah (8:1-2; cf. Ephesians 1:9-10; Colossians 1:19-20).

Perfect and entire intimacy with His creation through man, the creaturely image-bearing son, was God's eternal design. And that relationship, defined, ordered and lived out in perfect truth, is what *covenant* is all about. This is why the Sinai Covenant was based in the Levitical priesthood. The covenant defined and prescribed the relationship between the Israelite people and their God, and the priests mediated that relationship as representing both parties. And because of the inherent alienation between Yahweh and His covenant people, this mediation involved oblation, atonement and reconciliation. Without it, there could be no relationship; the priesthood was the basis of the Law (7:11).

This means that the inauguration of a new priesthood – a priesthood of an entirely different order – implies the inauguration of a *new* covenant appropriate to it. In the words of the Hebrews writer, the High Priest of this new priestly order mediates a *better* covenant that corresponds to the superior excellence of His ministration. And though this new covenant surpasses its predecessor in numerous ways, the writer chose to highlight one particular dimension of that superiority: Divine promise is the foundation of both covenants, but the better covenant stands upon *better* promises (8:6b).

But what exactly does he mean by this? How are God's covenants founded on promises? And what are the promises underlying the Israelite covenant and its messianic counterpart, and how are the latter promises "better"? The place to begin is the fact that God's covenants are defined and purposeful relational structures that He establishes to disclose and advance His designs for His creation. These designs are foreordained outcomes, and so are *promissory*. It's in this sense that covenants stand upon promises.

In the case of the Israelite (Sinai) covenant, the foundational promise underlying it was itself articulated in the form of a covenant, namely God's covenant with Abraham (Exodus 6:1-8). And that covenant, in turn, was founded on God's pledge and oath to achieve His restorative and consummative purpose for the world through Abraham and his offspring (Genesis 12:1-3, 22:15-18, 28:10-14). The children of Israel were that offspring, and thus the promises underlying God's covenant with them pertained, not so much to the nation as such, but to their role in His purposes: God's promise to Israel was that they were to be His instrument for blessing all of mankind. This blessing would entail human beings coming to know their Creator-Father in truth by observing His life and likeness manifested in His image-children. Abraham's offspring would fulfill their calling through their faithful sonship, and it was unto this end that God established His covenant with them – the covenant that both defined and prescribed that sonship.

Behind the Israelite covenant stood the promise of universal blessing through faithful sonship, but the covenant couldn't bring to pass the promise it promoted. The simple reason was that Israel was incapable of fulfilling its sonship; *indeed, the covenant children shared the same predicament they were called to resolve*. They couldn't bring the blessing of true knowledge of God to the nations when they themselves lacked that knowledge. Israel was in need of the very blessing they were called to mediate to others.

This is the sense in which the first covenant wasn't "faultless." The fault resided, not with the covenant itself, but with the human parties to it. Thus the Hebrews writer: *It was because He found fault with **them** – the sons of the covenant – that God pledged a new covenant* (8:7-8). The readers should have understood these things, having embraced Jesus as Messiah. But the New Testament writings show that the early Jewish Christians wrestled with the implications of Jesus' messiahship – not just for the Gentiles, but for themselves and their Jewish countrymen. Jesus' first disciples were all Jews and proselytes to Judaism, and they embraced Him with the conviction that He was Israel's long-awaited Messiah. His death and resurrection forced them to rethink many things they had believed about the messianic person, work and kingdom, but this process of rethinking was slow and difficult, especially as it involved the defining issues of Jewish covenant life. Thus the disputes regarding circumcision and Torah, which reached a crisis point as more and more Gentiles embraced Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 15; Galatians 1-3).

The early Church's struggle with Torah observance shows that there was uncertainty about the impact of Jesus' death and resurrection on the Law of Moses (the Sinai Covenant). Israel's unfaithfulness had fractured the covenant relationship with Yahweh, resulting in His departure, His destruction of His sanctuary, and the nation's exile from the covenant land. But He'd promised through His prophets that the Messiah would rectify all of that and renew the covenant by securing forgiveness and cleansing, so that Yahweh would return to again dwell in their midst (ref. Ezekiel 36; Zechariah 2-3; etc.). The prophets promised covenant renewal, but in a way that fueled the expectation that Messiah was going to restore the *former* covenant order associated with David's kingdom (cf. 2 Samuel 7 with Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1-12; Jeremiah 23:1-8, 33:1-26; Ezekiel 34:1-25, 37:1-28; Amos 9:11-15; etc.). And so, while Jesus' Jewish disciples recognized that He'd renewed the covenant as promised, it was easy to misjudge what this renewal entailed.

One might argue that all of this confusion and difficulty could have been avoided if God had simply been clear about His intent for His Messiah and what He was to accomplish. Why give the impression that the goal was the restoration of the Israelite theocracy (David's kingdom) under the Law of Moses, if this wasn't the case? Why present the future messianic renewal in terms of the existing covenantal order, if it actually involved a whole new order of things? But God wasn't careless – let alone deceptive – in choosing to frame His promises in this manner. Indeed, speaking the truth about the Messiah and the messianic work demanded this sort of presentation. At the same time, God was careful to make clear that Messiah wouldn't simply restore the former order; hence the Hebrews writer was able to draw from Jeremiah's prophecy – issued nearly six hundred years before Jesus' birth – to demonstrate the *newness* in Messiah's covenant renewal.

God expressed His future intentions in Israelite terms, not so much because He was addressing Israelites, but because his designs pertained, in the first instance, to the Jewish people as Abraham's covenant children. And the Jews were primary in God's purposes in that He'd chosen them in Abraham to be the instrument for accomplishing His purposes for the human world and the entire creation. Salvation (reconciliation and renewal) was to come through Israel (John 4:22), but only as Israel was itself "saved" through Messiah's triumphal intervention (ref. again Isaiah 11:1-12; also 49:1-7, 53:1-55:5; Micah 5:1-4).

When Israel became Israel in truth, then it would be equipped and able to fulfill its mission as the covenant seed of Abraham; then Israel would become the vehicle of Yahweh's blessing for all the world. This is what Paul had in mind when he affirmed that the power of God – now embodied and manifested in the gospel of the kingdom – is to the Jew *first*, and then to the Gentile (Romans 1:16; cf. also Zechariah 8:18-23). And so the prophets spoke in Israelite terms because they spoke of a future renewal having Israel at its heart, a cosmic renewal that would spring from the renewal of the Abrahamic seed.

The prophets spoke of a renewal in which Israel would become Israel *indeed*: the "son of God" as defined and required by the Mosaic Covenant; the faithful image-son through whom Yahweh would mediate His blessing to every tribe, tongue, nation and people, just as He pledged to Abraham. Thus God promised covenant renewal, but a renewal in which the covenant relationship of Father and son would be truly and fully realized. The Mosaic Covenant prescribed this relationship, but was unable to secure it. And so, simply reviving this covenant would only revive the same problem. Israel needed to be *renewed* (made new), not *restored*, and so enabled to fulfill its election. Thus the renewing of the covenant involved the formation of a *new* covenant relationship, and this was precisely what God promised through the prophet Jeremiah.

This, then, explains how the covenant Jesus mediates stands on better promises: The Sinai Covenant was enacted on the Abrahamic Covenant and its promises, but it was unable to see those promises realized. It prescribed Israel's faithfulness to its calling, but couldn't secure what it required. The New Covenant presupposes those same promises and their obligations, but stands on the *further pledge* that Yahweh would see those promises and their obligations fulfilled in an Israelite indeed – a true son of Abraham through whom God would reclaim and bless the world of men (Galatians 3:19-4:6).