

Hebrews 7:11-12, 18-19

Pastor: Hebrews 7:11-12, 18-19: A change of law has taken place, because it was weak and worthless.

“Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron? For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also...For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.”

7:11 Hebrews 7:11-12 are critical for readers to approach properly, if we want to correctly understand the message of Hebrews in association to the Torah.¹ The author inquires of his audience, asking them, “If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood...why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?” (Hebrews 7:11, NIV). These words were largely directed to Jews who would have possibly expected some kind of “perfection” to be attained through the Levitical priesthood and its animal sacrifices.

Leon Morris actually gives us a very good definition of “perfection,” saying that it “means the condition in which [people] are acceptable to God.”² The source text employs the term *teleiōsis* (τελείωσις), meaning “a completing, perfecting...fulfilment, accomplishment; the event which verifies a promise” (Thayer).³ The perfection that our author is speaking about is the state of people being totally and completely reconciled to their Creator. This was a state that was simply unattainable in the Levitical system, because sacrifices had to be continually offered before the Lord for the propitiation of sins. This does not necessarily make the Levitical priesthood bad, or even “imperfect,” because the Levitical priesthood was surely given and established by a God who is perfect. It does, rather, make the Levitical priesthood incomplete and unable to bring about the complete perfection that is to be established in the lives of God’s people.

The CJB/CJSB offers us a good rendering of *teleiōsis*, rendering Hebrews 7:11 with, “if it had been possible to reach the goal through the system of *cohanim* derived from Levi.” David H. Stern says that “here it means ‘reaching the goal’ of being reconciled with God and able to be eternally in his presence, as Yeshua is now...In order for sinful human beings to reach this goal, they must indeed become ‘perfect’ by having their sins forgiven by God. The author will later show that this can never come about through the Levitical priesthood but can come about through Yeshua’s priesthood.”⁴ William L. Lane also correctly states, “the writer’s sustained concern [is] with God’s declared intention to bring humanity to its appointed goal of a right relationship with himself.”⁵

A significant thrust of the Epistle to the Hebrews is in recognizing the superiority of Yeshua the Messiah’s priesthood after the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:23-28), which offers a permanent atonement for human sin, when compared to the Levitical priesthood and its animal sacrifices that had to be offered over and over again. The author of Hebrews rightly testifies that “perfection [has not] been attainable through the Levitical priesthood” (Hebrews 7:11a, RSV), such as “reach[ing] the goal” (CJB/CJSB) being eternal redemption and reconciliation with God. Obviously, an appreciation for what the Levitical priesthood and its animal sacrifices are, is necessary, for anyone to appreciate the much greater and more significant priesthood of Yeshua and His own personal sacrifice.

The challenge, among many readers and interpreters, is that they view these statements about perfection, as often being a denigration of the Torah or Law of Moses, as they connect the statement “if

¹ This entry has been adapted from the commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*.

² Leon Morris, “Hebrews,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 12:66.

³ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 619.

⁴ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 680.

⁵ Lane, *Hebrews*, 47a:181.

perfection was through the Levitical priesthood” to “on the basis of it the people received the Law.” It is often said that the Levitical priesthood was “imperfect,” and thus God’s Torah or Law too was “imperfect.” These are, however, **statements that the author of Hebrews does not make.** All our author says is that the Levitical priesthood could not bring about the full perfection of human beings, meaning a permanent atonement and reconciliation of sins before the Creator God.

Morris, while validly noting permanent atonement and reconciliation for sins before God, as the proper definition of “perfection,” sadly does conclude, “We ought not to think of the law and priesthood as two quite separate things that happened to be operative at the same time among the same people. The priesthood is the very basis of the law.”⁶ Paul Ellingworth similarly echoes, “Priesthood and law are indissolubly bound together; and within this relation, priesthood is logically prior.”⁷ Here, it is simply asserted that the Levitical priesthood and the Torah are absolutely tied together, and you either have to have them both, or neither at all.

Significant confusion abounds from the author’s parenthetical statement in Hebrews 7:11b, which the RSV renders as “for under it the people received the law.” The implication from this English reading is that the Ancient Israelites being given the Torah is predicated on the existence of the Levitical priesthood. Presumably one could conclude that if the Levitical priesthood is inferior to the Messiah’s priesthood, that the significance of Moses’ Teaching is to also be diminished. Hebrews 7:11b is a definite place in our author’s treatise, where there are some translation **and** perspective issues that need to be significantly evaluated.

The contention that the Torah was given to Ancient Israel on the basis of the priesthood is strictly incorrect—as can be easily detected from any survey of the Pentateuch. No Levitical priesthood or animal sacrifices could be established for Ancient Israel until the instructions that regulated such a priesthood, its sacrifices, and the Tabernacle were given to Moses by God. Nor can it be said that once the Levitical priesthood was established, then could the Torah’s instruction for the remainder of Ancient Israel then be codified. Yet this is precisely what many theologians think: with the Levitical priesthood gone, so then is the Torah as a whole gone.

What is intended by Hebrews 7:11b is going to come down entirely to how we view the statement *ho laos gar ep’ autēs nenomothetētai* (ὁ λαὸς γὰρ ἐπ’ αὐτῆς νενομοθέτηται), with much attention given to the specific clause *ep’ autēs*.

How should *ho laos gar ep’ autēs nenomothetētai* be translated? Notably absent from this clause is the preposition *hupo* (ὑπό) or “under,” making the rendering “for under it” (RSV/ESV/HCSB), invalid. Most appropriately, the preposition *epi* in Hebrews 7:11b is a **“marker of perspective, in consideration of, in regard to, on the basis of, concerning, about, w. gen.”** (BDAG), with this lexical entry further noting how “ἐπ’ αὐτῆς [*ep’ autēs* means] *on the basis of it* **Hb 7:11.**”⁸ So, on the basis of “it,” the Levitical priesthood, some action was to be performed to the Ancient Israelites.

While most contemporary English translations communicate something to the extent that “through which the people received the law” (Hebrews 7:11b, *Lattimore*), it is necessary that we probe the significance of the verb *nomotheteō* (νομοθετέω), “to make law” (*LS*),⁹ which F.F. Bruce says means “legislate.”¹⁰ The verb *nomotheteō* does appear in the Septuagint to describe the giving of the Torah by God to Moses: “the commandments that I wrote **to legislate** [*nomotheteō*] for them” (Exodus 24:12, NETS).¹¹ At the same time, though, *nomotheteō* appears in various contexts where God’s Torah being taught to people is in view. Deuteronomy 17:10 notably says, concerning the Levitical priests, “And you shall do according to the word whatever they report to you from the place that the Lord your God may choose for his name to be called there, and you shall guard very much to do according to all things whatever **is legislated** [*nomotheteō*] for you”

⁶ Morris, in *EXP*, 12:66.

⁷ Ellingworth, 372.

⁸ BDAG, 365.

⁹ *LS*, 535.

¹⁰ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 164 fn#36.

¹¹ Cf. Psalm 84:6; 4 Maccabees 5:25.

(NETS). The Levitical priesthood definitely had a Torah-prescribed responsibility to teach Ancient Israel God's commandments (Deuteronomy 33:10),¹² to in other words "legislate" the people. That the verb *nomotheteō* can regard God's people being taught His Law and commandments, is something witnessed throughout the Septuagint version of Psalms, where *nomotheteō* translated the Hebrew verb *yara* (יָרָא)¹³:

"Good and upright is the Lord: therefore will he instruct [*nomotheteō* trans. *yara*] sinners in *the way*" (Psalm 24:8, LXE).

"Who is the man that fears the Lord? he shall instruct [*nomotheteō* trans. *yara*] him in the way which he has chosen" (Psalm 24:12, LXE).

"Teach [*nomotheteō* trans. *yara*] me, O Lord, in thy way, and guide me in a right path, because of mine enemies" (Psalm 27:11, LXE).

"Teach [*nomotheteō* trans. *yara*] me, O Lord, the way of thine ordinances, and I will seek it out continually" (Psalm 119:33, LXE).

"I have not declined from thy judgments; for thou hast instructed [*nomotheteō* trans. *yara*] me" (Psalm 119:102, LXE).

What would it mean for us to render Hebrews 7:11b as "**upon it the people were legislated**" (PME), meaning that upon the basis of the Levitical priesthood Israel was to be instructed in the Torah? It is not a stretch at all to conclude that by the mid-First Century the Second Temple Saddusaical priesthood had **utterly failed** at such a responsibility—especially given the fact that the Sadducees were flat known for denying the resurrection,¹⁴ the essential truth upon which Yeshua's Messiahship and our faith in Him must ultimately be based.¹⁵ That the First Century Jewish community was not properly "legislated," meaning taught God's Torah from the Temple priesthood, is easily witnessed. The Saddusaical priesthood was decisively impotent to instruct people in perfection—precisely because "the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit" (Acts 23:8a)—and a new priesthood, that of Yeshua the Messiah, needed to be established!

But if those of Ancient Israel were to once be taught the Law, "legislated," upon the basis of the Levitical priesthood—what was to happen with Yeshua's Melchizedekian priesthood taking over? Was the Torah to be gone with it too? This is what most conclude. However, this is an insupportable conclusion when the New Covenant promise that the author of Hebrews will appeal to *twice* (Hebrews 8:8-12; 10:16-17), involves God's laws being written on the hearts and minds of the redeemed. The Torah surely has key instructions regarding human ethics, morality, fairness, *relationships and sexuality*, and how God's people are to live their day-to-day lives.

Previously, God's people were to be legislated/instructed in His Torah on the basis of the Levitical priesthood's service, something which by the First Century had failed because of its Saddusaical occupants (Hebrews 7:28a). With Yeshua the Messiah on the scene, the New Covenant is to be legislated/instructed forth on the basis of the promises of the Messianic expectation and His superior priestly service (Hebrews 7:16b, 20-27), **most especially involving permanent forgiveness of sins** (Hebrews 9:14).

7:12 The gravity of Yeshua's sacrifice for fallen humankind, should be significant enough for all readers of Hebrews to legitimately recognize its salvation historical significance, and the changes that are naturally

¹² "They shall teach Your ordinances to Jacob, and Your law to Israel. They shall put incense before You, and whole burnt offerings on Your altar" (Deuteronomy 33:10).

¹³ [BibleWorks 8.0: LEH Lexicon](#) (Lust-Eynikel-Hauspie). MS Windows Vista/7 Release. Norfolk: BibleWorks, LLC, 2009-2010. DVD-ROM notes how *nomotheteō* (νομοθετέω) "always transl. of hry," and can mean both "to give laws to" and "to instruct, to teach, to ordain."

¹⁴ Mark 12:18; Matthew 22:33; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8.

¹⁵ For a worthwhile exploration, consult N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

resultant of it. Hebrews 7:11-19, interestingly enough, are subtitled in Louis H. Evans' *PreachC* volume as, "The Need for a New Priesthood."¹⁶

When seeing Hebrews 7:12, many of today's Christians conclude that the Torah is no longer to be followed by God's people. This verse says, "For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also," and readers need to keep this statement in definite view of the wider issues that the author of Hebrews is speaking about to his audience. Eternal perfection was not something attainable through the Levitical priesthood (Hebrews 7:11), but is something to be found in the Messiah Yeshua's Melchizedekian priesthood (Hebrews 7:28; cf. 9:11). Yet, there is a problem with Yeshua's priesthood being regarded as superior to the Levitical priesthood: Yeshua is a member of the tribe of Judah, whereas according to the Torah those serving the Tabernacle or Temple are to be of the tribe of Levi (Hebrews 7:11c; Numbers 18:21-24). This is what has largely necessitated "a change in the priesthood" (Hebrews 7:12, RSV), *metatithemenēs gar tēs hierōsunēs* (μετατιθεμένης γὰρ τῆς ἱερωσύνης), something clearly resultant from the salvation work accomplished by the Messiah.

Any "change in the law" (RSV), *nomou metathesis* (νόμου μετάθεσις), that is being spoken of concerns the establishment of Yeshua's Melchizedekian priesthood in Heaven (Hebrews 7:27). The various changes in view are those which specifically regard the priesthood and sacrificial system, resultant from the salvation work of the Messiah. Unfortunately, though, a great number of today's readers of Hebrews are unable to see this. Bruce's conclusions are fairly typical of what one will find:

"[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."¹⁷

It would be quite difficult to argue against the sacrificial work and resurrection of the Messiah not inaugurating *any* changes in the relation of humankind to the Creator, or even to the Mosaic Law. Likewise, the author of Hebrews is clear throughout his treatise that the source of perfection for the redeemed is not the Torah or any of its instructions (Hebrews 7:11, 19; 9:9; 10:10). We should agree with David A. deSilva's assertion: "the Torah and its priesthood could not usher in any worshiper save the high priest into God's presence, so they are unable to lead human beings into God's very presence in the unshakable, heavenly realm."¹⁸ Such perfection is obviously only available in Yeshua Himself.

Does the "change of law" in Hebrews 7:12, at all render God's Torah completely invalid as instruction for born again Believers? Much of how we view the validity or non-validity of the Torah in Hebrews 7:12 regards our approach to the verb *metatithēmi* (μετατίθημι) and noun *metathesis* (μετάθεσις). Hebrews' interpreters tend to take these terms as the author having a rather negative approach toward Moses' Teaching. Ellingworth describes how "metati,qhmi...means literally 'put somewhere else,' hence figuratively 'change,'" further informing us, "more often the standpoint is that of the place from which something is moved, so that the verb comes to mean 'remove,'"¹⁹ which it can mean as employed elsewhere in the epistle (Hebrews 11:5). Some take *metatithēmi* as a complete abrogation of the Torah. However, not only does such a conclusion stand in opposition to the Messiah's own stated intention of upholding the validity and relevance of the Mosaic Law (Matthew 5:17-19), but it has a considerable difficulty in terms of Hebrews' own author stating how Yeshua's priesthood has inaugurated the era of New Covenant with God's laws to be written on the hearts and minds of the redeemed (Hebrews 8:8-12).

Lane notably renders Hebrews 7:12 with, "For whenever the priesthood is altered, there is necessarily also an alteration of law" (*WBC*).²⁰ This corresponds closely to one of the definitions for *metatithēmi* provided by *BDAG*: "**to effect a change in state or condition, change, alter,**" noting "*when the priesthood is changed,*

¹⁶ Evans, 115.

¹⁷ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 166.

¹⁸ deSilva, 271.

¹⁹ Ellingworth, 374.

²⁰ Lane, *Hebrews*, 47a:173.

i.e. passed on to another.”²¹ While “**removal**” is a possible definition of the noun *metathesis*, so too is “**change, transformation**” (BDAG).²² If a complete removal of the Levitical priesthood is intended by Hebrews 7:12, then what is to be made of Tanach prophecies such as Ezekiel chs. 40-44 that detail the reestablishment of the Levites in the Millennium? Likewise, what do any of us do with the word, “I will also take some of them for priests *and* for Levites” (Isaiah 66:21)? A complete removal of the Levitical priesthood from the scene of God’s future plan is insupportable; a complete removal of the Torah from the scene of God’s current dealings with His people is also insupportable if the thrust of the New Covenant includes a supernatural transcription of the Law onto their hearts. Ellingworth fortunately concludes how “In the present verse, both noun and verb should be understood neutrally as ‘change,’ not of the ‘removal’ of law altogether.”²³ The conclusions of Walter C. Kaiser, an evangelical Old Testament theologian from the Reformed tradition, should be well taken here:

“It would be wrong to think that just because the sacrificial system had been replaced therefore the whole law, including the moral law of the Decalogue (Ex 20; Dt 5) and the Holiness Code (Lev 18-20), had likewise been superseded and replaced.”²⁴

Indeed, what is in view in Hebrews 7:12 are how the various alterations brought about by Yeshua’s priestly service in Heaven, regard how “a change of priesthood must mean a change of law” (REB). The great Methodist commentator Adam Clarke would conclude, “The priesthood, therefore, being changed, Jesus coming in the place of Aaron, the law of ordinances and ceremonies, which served only to point out the Messiah, must of necessity be changed also.”²⁵ While such a view originates from the traditional Protestant perspective of the Torah making up moral, civil, and ceremonial commandments—which might be a bit artificial—Clarke does not see a widescale dismissal of the Mosaic Law in Hebrews 7:12. Instead, the only changes asserted concern the priesthood and/or sacrificial system.

In his Complete Jewish Bible, Stern renders Hebrews 7:12 with, “For if the system of *cohanim* is transformed, there must of necessity occur a transformation of *Torah*.” He justifies this on the basis that “no change or transformation in *Torah* is envisioned other than in connection with the priesthood and sacrificial system. The term ‘*metathesis*’ implies retention of the basic structure of *Torah*, with some of its elements rearranged (‘transformed’); it does not imply abrogation of either the *Torah* as a whole or of *mitzvot* [commandments] not connected with the priesthood and the sacrificial system.”²⁶ These conclusions too are most appreciated. The *nomou metathesis* most certainly includes a recognition of Yeshua the Messiah as the central focus of the Father’s redemptive activity (cf. Hebrews 1:1-4; 13:8); only the Messiah event can “change” anything as it regards our approach to the Torah.

The Epistle to the Hebrews, as any cursory reading or survey will reveal, is concerned about how various First Century Jewish Believers (and probably many non-Jewish Believers as well) are going to handle the reality that Yeshua’s Melchizedkian priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood. The author’s issue is not with the Ten Commandments, or how Yeshua directs His followers to observe the Torah *most especially* in matters of relationship with other people (i.e., Matthew chs. 5-7). One cannot use Hebrews 7:12 and the “change in law” to cast aside the significance of the seventh-day Sabbath/*Shabbat*, the appointed times, or kosher dietary laws—*much less* any of the Torah’s commandments regulating human ethics and morality. One can use Hebrews 7:12 to argue that the “change in law,” required by Yeshua’s priesthood, involves the capital penalties of the Torah being remitted by His sacrifice at Golgotha (cf. Colossians 2:14), and various rearrangements and reprioritizations naturally enacted by what the Lord has accomplished.

²¹ BDAG, 642.

²² Ibid., 639.

The Friberg Lexicon further notes, “figuratively *changeover* from one state or institution to another, *transformation*, *change*” (BibleWorks 8.0: Friberg Lexicon.)

²³ Ellingworth, 374.

²⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 367.

²⁵ E-Sword 8.0.8: Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the Bible.

²⁶ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 681.

There is some difficulty presented here to various Messianic people today, who might believe or try to argue, that every single commandment of the Torah can be followed today. This precludes that with the coming of Yeshua *nothing has changed*, and humankind still needs ongoing animal sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. But the coming of Yeshua to Planet Earth *did change things*, just as the development of economics and technology has rendered certain aspects of the Torah unapplicable to its followers, such as the laws concerning slavery.²⁷

The implications of this for us today are that if it is the priesthood and sacrificial system that have been changed via the coming of Yeshua, then what aspects of the Torah remain relevant for God's people? Obvious areas that the Messianic movement has been helping to restore to the community of faith include keeping the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat*, commemorating the appointed times of Leviticus 23, and eating kosher. Certainly, there are arguments against observing these things put forward by many contemporary Christians, which require today's Messianics to be continually studying the Apostolic Scriptures in their First Century Jewish context. The "change" or "transformation" that the Torah has experienced in the arrival of the Messiah primarily regards permanent atonement for sins and Yeshua serving in the office of Melchizedekian priest. It does not regard how Messiah followers relate in their day-to-day lives with God and what He considers acceptable and unacceptable, ethical and moral behavior. The Lord still wants us to spend special times with Him every week and in sacred seasons such as Passover or Tabernacles. The Lord still wants His people to eat properly. The Lord still wants His people to be instructed by the Torah, which is the foundation of His written Word. And, the people of God are to surely emulate the Messiah Yeshua who followed Moses' Teaching.

7:18-19 Within the Epistle to the Hebrews, readers definitely encounter how Yeshua's Melchizedekian priesthood, with the Messiah interceding in Heaven at the right hand of the Father (Hebrews 8:1-2; 10:12; 12:2), is surely superior to the Levitical priesthood—as highly respected and regarded as the Levitical priesthood is to surely be. Changes have occurred to the relationship God's people have toward the priesthood and the Torah, as a result of Yeshua's sacrificial death, resurrection, and ascension. But does this at all mean that the Torah is to be thrown away as irrelevant instruction for Messiah followers? This is a conclusion that many do draw from reading Hebrews 7:18-19. Yet, a more careful reading, of what our author communicates to his First Century audience, is needed.

Many of today's Christians, unfortunately, may conveniently forget that the Author of the Torah and its commandments, **is actually God Himself**. Is the Torah or Law of Moses absolutely meaningless to read, and completely irrelevant for guiding Believers in a path of holiness and sanctification? Is the Torah as given by the Lord really of no spiritual value of all? The conclusion that the Torah or Law of Moses is to be totally set aside is not what Hebrews 7:18-19 says. Hebrews 7:18-19, while speaking of the insufficiency of the Torah providing eternal perfection—something obviously only available in Yeshua's salvation—only speaks of "a former commandment" set aside:

"The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God" (Hebrews 7:18-19, NIV).

Hebrews 7:18-19 do not say that God's Torah was set aside; what is said is that "a former commandment is set aside" (RSV) or "The earlier rules are repealed" (REB). The particular clause of interest is *athetēsis men gar ginetai proagousēs entolēs* (ἀθετήσις μὲν γὰρ γίνεται προαγούσης ἐντολῆς), with the important term in view being *athetēsis* (ἀθετήσις). *BDAG* defines *athetēsis* to be "gener. **the process of causing someth. to be set aside, removal.**"²⁸ Elsewhere in the Epistle to the Hebrews it describes the putting away of sin by Yeshua's sacrifice (Hebrews 9:26), as well as people who disregard the Torah of Moses (Hebrews 10:28). The Friberg Lexicon considers *athetēsis* to largely be "a legal technical term *annulment, setting aside* as being no longer in

²⁷ Consult the author's article "Addressing the Frequently Avoided Issues Messianics Encounter in the Torah," appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*.

²⁸ *BDAG*, 24.

force.”²⁹ While AMG defines *athetēsis* as “Cancellation, disannulling,” its commentary says that “In Heb. 7:18, it refers to the natural abrogation or annulment of the commandment for the sacrifice of animals in that it was weak and unprofitable.”³⁰

As far as looking to the Levitical priesthood and its animal sacrifices as being the source of perfection and reconciliation with the Creator, Believers in Yeshua should effectively consider such a system nullified. The animal sacrifices of the Torah are not required with the final atonement of Yeshua on the cross offered *for a permanent covering* of human sin, and would at best be redundant. With the impending destruction of the Second Temple in the First Century, things were about to be significantly altered for the Messianic community, and it needed to be solidified in the minds of many Jewish Believers that the sacrifice of Yeshua was primary to the animal sacrifices of the Temple. Still, the issue in view in Hebrews 7:18-19 is not the Torah in its totality, or its code of conduct for men and women of faith, but instead “a former commandment” concerning the regulation of the Levitical priesthood.

Various Hebrews’ commentators, even expressing a preference to the Torah as a whole being set aside, have to recognize that the main issue in view is the instruction regarding the Levitical priesthood: Bruce remarks, “It was inevitable that the earlier law should be abrogated sooner or later; for all the impressive solemnity of the sacrificial ritual and the sacerdotal ministry, no real peace of conscience was procured thereby, no immediate access to God.”³¹ Ellingworth similarly says, “Here the context suggests ἐντολή [*entolē*] a particular command...but since no individual [OT] text is cited, it is probably better to think of the legislation establishing the Aaronic priesthood and its function.”³²

The fact that the Messiah’s Melchizedian priesthood causes “a setting aside of a former commandment” (Hebrews 7:18a), of the Levitical priesthood, has to be balanced with various prophecies within the Tanach (Old Testament) which speak of the reinstatement of the Levitical priesthood and animal sacrifices in the future. In Jeremiah 33:20-22, the Lord says that His covenant with David and with the Levites cannot be broken:

“Thus says the LORD, ‘If you can break My covenant for the day and My covenant for the night, so that day and night will not be at their appointed time, then My covenant may also be broken with David My servant so that he will not have a son to reign on his throne, and with the Levitical priests, My ministers. As the host of heaven cannot be counted and the sand of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the descendants of David My servant and the Levites who minister to Me.’”

If any of us holds to a pre-millennial end-time scenario, then there must be an operating Levitical priesthood with animal sacrifices occurring, in order for the Abomination of Desolation to take place (Daniel 9:27; cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:4). Furthermore, Ezekiel chs. 40-44, speaking of the Millennium, does prophecy of an operating Levitical priesthood with animal sacrifices occurring in the Messianic Age. Ezekiel 44:10-11 describes the Levites in the Millennial Temple performing animal sacrifices:

“But the Levites who went far from Me when Israel went astray, who went astray from Me after their idols, shall bear the punishment for their iniquity. Yet they shall be ministers in My sanctuary, having oversight at the gates of the house and ministering in the house; they shall slaughter the burnt offering and the sacrifice for the people, and they shall stand before them to minister to them.”

The only way any Bible reader can get around the future reality of animal sacrifices occurring in the Millennium is to argue that these sayings are metaphorical, and are not to be taken too literally—that the future of God’s people is somehow only *mimicked* in language of the past. Conservative pre-millennialists, including myself, have considerable difficulty just allegorizing something like Ezekiel chs. 40-44. We instead have to conclude the *athetēsis* or setting aside of the Levitical priesthood and sacrifices (Hebrews 7:18) to

²⁹ BibleWorks 8.0: Friberg Lexicon.

³⁰ Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), 89.

³¹ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 169.

³² Ellingworth, 381.

He does further conclude, unfortunately like many interpreters, “This is for our author the heart of the νόμος [*nomos*], and is not sharply distinguished from it here.”

either concern eternal perfection being now offered in Yeshua with such a previous system effectively nullified, and/or a temporary setting aside of this system with the priesthood once again operative at a future point for God's end-time purposes.

Various Christian prophecy teachers, who we would easily describe as being opposed to the relevance of the Torah for Believers today, have to even recognize the reality of animal sacrifices being performed by Levites during the Millennium. Tim LaHaye states in his *Prophecy Study Bible*, commenting on Ezekiel 43:15-27, that "The offerings will be memorial and retrospective, looking back to Christ's finished work on the cross, instead of looking forward to Christ."³³ These same sentiments are elaborated on in more detail by Walvoord, in his book *Israel in Prophecy*:

"A number of Scriptures also describe the temple worship which will characterize the millennial kingdom. According to Ezekiel, a magnificent temple will be built, and a system of priesthood and memorial sacrifices will be set up...Some have felt it impossible to have a system of animal sacrifices subsequent to the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross in light of New Testament passages stating that the sacrifice of Christ makes other sacrifices unnecessary. Though varied explanations have been given for Ezekiel 40-48 which unfolds these details, no satisfactory explanation has been made other than that it is a description of millennial worship. In any case, it is clear that the sacrifices are not expiatory, but merely memorials of the one complete sacrifice of Christ. If in the wisdom and sovereign pleasure of God the detailed system of sacrifices in the Old Testament were a suitable foreshadowing of that which would be accomplished by the death of His Son, and if a memorial of Christ's death is to be enacted, it would not seem unfitting that some sort of a sacrificial system would be used."³⁴

As we read Hebrews 7:18 in concert with other texts of Scripture, it seems to speak of a temporary "setting aside" of the Levitical priesthood and animal sacrifices, until the appointed season in God's end-time plan for the future when they will be reinstated. The author of Hebrews, writing to Jews in the First Century whose worship and spiritual hub was centered around the Jerusalem Temple—the destruction of which was imminent—wrote that it "was weak and useless" (NIV) in light of the sacrifice and atoning work of Messiah Yeshua. Lane is keen to note for us, "Its 'weakness' (ἀσθενής [*asthenēs*]) inheres not in the law or its purpose, but in the people upon whom it depends for its accomplishment...Its 'uselessness' (ἀνωφελής [*anōphelēs*]) derives from the fact that the law regulated the approach to God in a cultic sense and was able to cleanse only externally (9:9-10, 13, 23; 10:14)."³⁵ The main problem with the Levitical priesthood and its sacrifices was its inability or ineffectiveness to offer a permanent solution to the alienation that sin causes between human beings and their Creator: "a former requirement is set aside because of its weakness and ineffectiveness" (TLV).

Recognizing the limitations of the Levitical priesthood and animal sacrifices, it should not be surprising that the author of Hebrews can assert "the Law made nothing perfect" (Hebrews 7:19a). Do be reminded that when Hebrews 7:19a says this, the statement being made is that perfection is *only attainable* in the Messiah of Israel; it is not a claim that the Torah is somehow not *tamim* (תָּמִים; Psalm 19:7) or is to be unvalued by God's people, because the author of Hebrews *never* says "the Law is not perfect."³⁶ His point is "there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God" (Hebrews 7:19b), this hope or expectation (*elpis*, ἐλπίς) being what Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) has brought about by His sacrifice and priesthood (cf. 1 Timothy 1:1; Colossians 1:27).

The Complete Jewish Bible notably renders Hebrews 7:19a with, "the *Torah* did not bring anything to the goal." Here, the verb *teleioō* (τελειόω) would be taken to mean something along the lines of "**to overcome or supplant an imperfect state of things by one that is free fr. objection, bring to an end, bring to its**

³³ Tim LaHaye, ed., *Tim LaHaye Prophecy Study Bible*, KJV (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2000), 885.

³⁴ John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), pp 125-126.

³⁵ Lane, *Hebrews*, 47a:185.

³⁶ "The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple" (Psalm 19:7).

The LXX notably renders *tamim* or "perfect" as *amōmos* (ἀμωμος), meaning "faultless" (NETS).

goal/accomplishment" (BDAG).³⁷ What the Torah cannot do is bring the goal of eternal perfection into reality within a person's life; such *reaching the goal* can only be realized in a personal relationship with the Messiah Himself (Hebrews 7:11).

The Torah is entirely incapable of bringing eternal redemption **because** eternal redemption is available only in Messiah Yeshua. But this does not all of a sudden make the Torah of no value. Even the Levitical priesthood and animal sacrifices of the Torah are to serve as a valuable type and shadow of the salvation Yeshua provides in Himself (Hebrews 10:1). It is critical for Messiah followers to study Moses' Teaching and its commandments which foreshadow Yeshua's ministry and salvation work (cf. John 5:46), because we not only learn more about the Messiah and who He is by delving into the Word—as we see Him prophesied in the Torah's accounts and instructions—but we can have confirmation that He truly is the anticipated Savior! Clarke issues the proper view, "it was only the outline of a great plan, the shadow of a glorious substance."³⁸ Yet, even with the Torah being incomplete to some degree—the Torah is hardly irrelevant or unimportant for faithful students of Scripture. It does mean, though, that our focus of spiritual interest and attention is to be on the Messiah. Donald Guthrie astutely concludes,

"There is no doubt that the writer [of Hebrews] does not here mean that the law itself is annulled, but that it can be discounted as a means of gaining perfection...It is characteristic of law—not merely the Mosaic law, but all law—that it has made nothing *perfect*. All it could do was focus on imperfection. Indeed the Mosaic law went further and demonstrated in its application that perfection was impossible."³⁹

Even though keeping the Torah is not intended to be something difficult for people (Deuteronomy 30:11ff), the human tendency will still be to disobey and ignore various commandments—even out of simple omission. It would not be inappropriate for us to approach Hebrews 7:19a with, "the Torah *itself* did not bring anything to the goal" (my paraphrase), as built into the Torah is a necessary component which inevitably points people to their need for a Divine Savior and to focus on Him in all of their decisions and actions for life. **We have the responsibility as Messianic Believers who are Torah obedient to make sure that everything we do is focused around Yeshua**, and God's continuing plan of salvation history communicated to us in His Instruction.

³⁷ BDAG, 996.

³⁸ E-Sword 8.0.8: Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible.

³⁹ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 164.