

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### **A Change in the Law (Hebrews 7:12)**

Is the Law of Moses—the Torah—relevant to Christians today? Well, that depends on who you ask. If you ask Jesus—or Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—the answer would be yes. In Matthew 5:17-20, Yeshua said that the whole Law of Moses will endure as long as heaven and earth exist and urged his followers to obey and teach even the least of the commandments. So, according to Yeshua, the Torah remains relevant to Christians today.

However, not everyone agrees. Some say that Christians should have nothing to do with the Law. For instance, Andrew Farley, a popular Christian author and teacher, writes the following:

It’s crucial to realize that the law and Jesus just don’t mix.

—Andrew Farley, *The Naked Gospel: The Truth You May Never Hear in Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 39

This statement from Farley seems to directly contradict Yeshua’s clear statement on the matter in Matthew 5:17-20. How does he come to this radical conclusion? Farley supports his assertion by citing Hebrews 7:12, which speaks about a “change” in the priesthood and law:

#### **Hebrews 7:12**

[For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.](#)

Here, the author of Hebrews is speaking about how Yeshua, who is from the tribe of Judah, serves as our High Priest even though the Torah requires that priests only be from the tribe of Levi (Hebrews 7:14; 8:4). Based on this verse, Farley concludes that the Levitical priesthood and thus the entire Law of Moses has been overturned:

Today, Christians regard Jesus Christ as their high priest, but according to the law, Jesus as high priest makes no sense at all. How then can we rightfully look to Jesus as our priest today? If the priestly line has changed, then the whole system for relating to God has to be replaced. And that’s exactly what has happened—the *whole* system has changed! ... Christians talk about Jesus

as their Savior, their Lord, and the author (priest) of their forgiveness. Some of these same believers then claim that the law is still for us today. In so doing, they adhere to a major contradiction...The bottom line is that if you appeal to Jesus as your priest, what place is there for the law in your life?

—Andrew Farley, *The Naked Gospel: The Truth You May Never Hear in Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 39

So, according to Farley, Hebrews 7:12 teaches that God got rid of the Levitical priesthood and the Torah. Therefore, as he puts it, “the law and Jesus just don’t mix.”

But is that really what the author of Hebrews is saying here? Actually, there are some major problems with this interpretation. Before we unpack the meaning of Hebrews 7:12, we will mention two reasons why Farley’s approach to this verse doesn’t work.

## **Problems with the Antinomian Interpretation of Hebrews 7:12**

While the antinomian interpretation of Hebrews 7:12 is popular, a growing number of New Testament scholars are rejecting this approach. They argue that there is no good reason to think that the author of Hebrews rejects the Levitical priesthood and Torah. Not only that, but they also argue that there *are* good reasons to think that he affirmed both. As New Testament scholar Matthew Thiessen writes:

[T]here simply is no evidence in Hebrews that the author rejects the ritual and cultic aspects of the Jewish law. Rather, there is strong evidence that he thinks these aspects of the law remain in effect at the time of his writing.

—Matthew Thiessen, “Hebrews and the Jewish Law,” in *So Great a Salvation: A Dialogue on the Atonement in Hebrews*, ed. Jon C. Laansma, George H. Guthrie, and Cynthia Long Westfall (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019), 185

What is the “strong evidence” showing that the author of Hebrews affirms the priestly and ritual laws in the Torah? One piece of evidence is the fact that he says the Messiah serves as our High Priest in heaven. Andrew Farley cited this fact as evidence that the Levitical priesthood is done away with. But ironically, this fact proves the opposite. The author goes to great lengths to explain to his readers how the Messiah can legitimately serve as a priest despite not being from the tribe of Levi. Why? Because as the author of Hebrews himself acknowledges, the Law of Moses prevents Yeshua from serving as a priest on earth:

### **Hebrews 8:4**

Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law.

So, since Yeshua is from the tribe of Judah (Hebrews 7:14), he is not qualified to serve as a priest on earth. That is why the author says that he would not be a priest if he were on earth. The Law of Moses has already designated the Levites to serve as priests on earth.

So then, how can the author of Hebrews claim that Yeshua serves as our High Priest? The author of Hebrews answers this question *not* by saying that the priestly laws have been done away with. Instead, he explains that the Messiah’s priesthood functions in heaven, where his tribal lineage does not restrict

him from serving as a priest:

#### **Hebrews 9:24**

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.

So, Yeshua is a priest in heaven, not on earth. Again, as the author of Hebrews explains, Yeshua cannot be a priest on earth because he is not from the tribe of Levi. This indicates that the author of Hebrews *presupposes* the Levitical priesthood's validity. He presupposes that the laws regarding genealogical descent for the Levitical priesthood remain in effect! Thiessen puts this point well:

Jesus is not qualified to be a priest on earth precisely because the law has already established an earthly priesthood and, in stipulating a genealogically determined priesthood, precluded Jesus of the tribe of Judah from ever becoming a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. For the author, the law regarding priestly descent from Levi remains valid and permanently disqualifies Jesus from being a priest on earth. This fact confirms the author's argument that, if Jesus is a high priest, then he must be one in the celestial realm, a realm that does not require priests to be descendants of Levi.

—Matthew Thiessen, “Hebrews and the Jewish Law,” in *So Great a Salvation: A Dialogue on the Atonement in Hebrews*, ed. Jon C. Laansma, George H. Guthrie, and Cynthia Long Westfall (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019), 187

The scholar David Moffitt echoes this understanding:

The writer takes seriously the fact that Jesus has now passed through the heavens and entered God's presence. This is one of the reasons that Hebrews so consistently locates Jesus' priestly work in the heavens. On earth, the Law forbids him from legitimately holding priestly office and thus serving in priestly ministries (Heb 8:4). Such a claim indicates that the author has not simply dismissed the authority of the Law.

—David M. Moffitt, “Weak and Useless? Purity, the Mosaic Law, and Perfection in Hebrews,” in *Law and Lawlessness in Early Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. David Lincicum, Ruth Sheridan, and Charles Stang (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 101-102

So, when the author of Hebrews says that Yeshua could not be a priest on earth, he is affirming the Law of Moses, which states that only people from the tribe of Levi can serve as priests. This is one of the problems with the idea that the Book of Hebrews advocates for doing away with or replacing the Law.

A second problem with the antinomian interpretation of Hebrews 7:12 is that it is inconsistent with the rest of the New Testament writings. For instance, both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts portray the apostles as continuing to worship at the temple. At the very end of Luke's Gospel, immediately following Yeshua's ascension, Luke says this:

#### **Luke 24:52-53**

And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God.

The Book of Acts continues this theme. Luke records that the apostles actively participated in the temple

services long after Yeshua ascended to heaven. In Acts 2:46, they attended the temple together “[day by day](#).” In Acts 3:1, Peter and John go to the temple at the hour of prayer. In Acts 21, Paul joins others in a Nazirite vow and publicly worships at the temple to reassure the Jewish believers in Jerusalem that he did not teach against the Torah. Luke records that an offering was even made for Paul and the others (Acts 21:26).

For more on the significance of Paul’s actions in Acts 21, see our teaching, “[Setting the Record Straight: Paul and the Law of Moses](#).”

If the apostles believed that the temple system of sacrifice and worship had been abolished or replaced, then why would they continue to go to the temple and participate in worship there? Long after Yeshua’s ascension to heaven, they were still endorsing the temple service. This is the opposite of what we would expect if Yeshua’s heavenly priesthood overturned the Levitical priesthood and replaced the Torah.

So, is there a way to read Hebrews 7:12 without causing the author of Hebrews to contradict himself and other parts of the New Testament? Well, let’s take a closer look at this verse.

## A Closer Look at Hebrews 7:12

If we back up just one verse from Hebrews 7:12, we find some important context. The author of Hebrews is making an argument about how the Levitical priesthood could not bring about “perfection”:

### Hebrews 7:11

[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?](#)

What does it mean that the Levitical priesthood could not attain “perfection”? Well, the author of Hebrews mostly uses “perfection” to describe what the Messiah did, as opposed to what the Levitical priests did. In Hebrews 7:19, the author says that the law—in particular, the law as it relates to the Levitical priesthood—“[made nothing perfect](#).” In Hebrews 9:9, he says that animal sacrifices “[cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper](#).” In Hebrews 10:1, he says that animal sacrifices can never “[make perfect](#)” those who draw near. So, we see that this “perfection” is something that the earthly priesthood could not accomplish. However, in his role as heavenly priest, the Messiah *could* accomplish that perfection. In contrast to the Levitical priesthood, the Messiah “[was made perfect](#)” and “[became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek](#)” (Hebrews 5:10; cf. Hebrews 7:28). Through the Messiah’s priestly service, “[a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God](#)” (Hebrews 7:19). As high priest, the Messiah was able to enter the “[perfect tent](#)” in heaven to secure eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:11-14). Unlike the animal sacrifices continually offered every year, which could not perfect worshipers (Hebrews 10:1) or take away their sin (Hebrews 10:4, 11), the Messiah’s single offering “[has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified](#)” (Hebrews 10:14) and fully removes sin (Hebrews 10:17).

So, the earthly Levitical priesthood could not obtain “perfection” because it could not take away sin and purify the consciences of believers. Only the perfect Messiah’s heavenly priesthood and sacrifice can attain this perfection. We should note that the Torah’s priestly regulations not being able to attain perfection does not mean that they are worthless. As Moffitt writes:

[T]he author’s comments about the Law’s limitations with respect to perfection are not a

dismissal of the legitimacy and authority of the Law within its proper sphere.

—David M. Moffitt, “Weak and Useless? Purity, the Mosaic Law, and Perfection in Hebrews,” in *Law and Lawlessness in Early Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. David Lincicum, Ruth Sheridan, and Charles Stang (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 101

That is, the Levitical priesthood and laws pertaining to the earthly sacrificial system still serve a valid function on earth. They simply were never intended to accomplish the perfection of the Messiah’s heavenly priesthood. However, if the laws governing the Levitical priesthood are still in effect, then that does present a question: how can the Messiah be a priest? As we already discussed, since the Messiah is not from the tribe of Levi, the Torah prevents him from being a priest (Hebrews 7:14; 8:4). Hence, according to the author of Hebrews, there was a need for a “[change in the priesthood](#),” which brings with it a “[change in the law](#).”

But what does that mean? Is the author of Hebrews saying that God abolished the Levitical priesthood and Law of Moses to allow the Messiah to serve as a priest? Not at all. We’ve already talked about how that interpretation doesn’t make sense when we consider the author’s own argument—which again, *presupposes* the ongoing validity of the Levitical priesthood. So, what *is* the author saying here? What is the “[change in the law](#)”?

The key to understanding the author’s argument is found in the meaning of the word “change.” There are two Greek words translated as “change” in Hebrews 7:12, both of them related: μετατίθημι and μετάθεσις:

### Hebrews 7:12

For when there is a [change \[μετατίθημι\]](#) in the priesthood, there is necessarily a [change \[μετάθεσις\]](#) in the law as well.

These Greek words convey the sense of “transforming,” “translating,” or “transferring.” What’s most interesting about these words, however, is that the author of Hebrews uses them again a few chapters later to speak about Enoch’s ascension to heaven:

### Hebrews 11:5

By faith Enoch was [taken up \[μετατίθημι\]](#) so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had [taken \[μετατίθημι\]](#) him. Now before he was [taken \[μετάθεσις\]](#) he was commended as having pleased God.

Why is it significant that these words are used to describe Enoch’s being “taken up” or transferred? Because when he uses these exact words to speak about a “change” in the priesthood and law, he means them in the same way he speaks about the transferring of Enoch. Since the Messiah belongs to a different priesthood—an ascended, heavenly priesthood—we must recognize that there is a different qualification or “law” for that priesthood. That qualification is “[an indestructible life](#)” (Hebrews 7:16). As Thiessen explains:

God translated or transformed Enoch so that he could move from the terrestrial realm to the heavenly realm without experiencing death. It is this same transformation or change that the author envisages with regard to the laws of priesthood. That is to say, the laws of the earthly priesthood do not apply just as they are to the celestial cult—they must be transformed. What qualifies one to be a priest changes when one moves from the terrestrial cult, where mortals

become priests through genealogical descent, to the celestial realm, where the mortal simply cannot exist. Rather, in this celestial cult, only the power of an indestructible life qualifies one to serve as priest.

—Matthew Thiessen, “Hebrews and the Jewish Law,” in *So Great a Salvation: A Dialogue on the Atonement in Hebrews*, ed. Jon C. Laansma, George H. Guthrie, and Cynthia Long Westfall (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019), 190

So, the change in the law was not a change in the Law of Moses. That is, the author is not claiming that the Law of Moses’s qualifications for Levitical priests have been altered. Those laws still apply *on earth*. To be a priest on earth, you have to be from the tribe of Levi. And again, according to the author of Hebrews himself, that law still applies on earth, which is why the Messiah cannot be a priest on earth (Hebrews 8:4). But to be a priest *in heaven* requires a different law—a law that applies *in heaven*. That is what the author means when he says that this heavenly priesthood requires a “change in the law.”

One way to think about this is to consider the different qualifications between a state governor and President of the United States. In order to be a governor of Florida, for instance, a candidate must be a resident of Florida. This means that a resident of Missouri cannot become governor of Florida due to the residency requirement. The law restricts a resident of Missouri from serving as governor of Florida. However, the law does not restrict a resident from Missouri from serving as President of the United States if he gets elected because there are different qualifications for serving as President. The law is “changed” depending upon whether we are talking about serving as governor of Florida or serving as President of the United States. Similarly, the Law of Moses restricts non-Levites from serving in the Levitical priesthood. However, the Law of Moses does not restrict non-Levites from serving in the heavenly priesthood. Moving from the earthly realm to the heavenly realm entails different qualifications—a change in the law. As Thiessen writes:

Hebrews claims that the cultic regulations have changed because there has been a change in location—from terrestrial to celestial.

—Matthew Thiessen, “Hebrews and the Jewish Law,” in *So Great a Salvation: A Dialogue on the Atonement in Hebrews*, ed. Jon C. Laansma, George H. Guthrie, and Cynthia Long Westfall (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019), 191

In sum, the author of Hebrews highlights the inability of the Levitical priesthood to achieve “perfection.” Hence, the Messiah’s heavenly priesthood introduces a “better hope” by providing eternal redemption, completely removing sin, and purifying the consciences of believers, something the Levitical priesthood and sacrifices were not intended to accomplish. The author affirms the validity of the priestly regulations in the Torah for the earthly priesthood but states that different qualifications are necessary for the heavenly priesthood. This “change in the law” is like Enoch’s transformation from the earthly to the heavenly realm—it is a shift from earthly to heavenly qualifications for priesthood. This change in the law pertains to the qualifications for the heavenly priesthood; it does not imply that the earthly priesthood has been abolished.

## **A Former Commandment is Set Aside**

Before we conclude, there is one other passage in Hebrews 7 worth exploring:

### **Hebrews 7:18-19**

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.

What does the author mean when he says that “a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness”? Some might take this as saying that the Law of Moses is now abolished because it was weak and useless, but that can’t be what the author is saying given everything we’ve discussed earlier in this teaching. Remember, the overall context is this contrast between the qualifications for the Levitical priesthood and the Messiah’s heavenly priesthood. In light of this context, we can look at just two verses earlier to see what the author is saying. He uses the same Greek word translated as “commandment” (ἐντολή) to describe the “requirement” that Levitical priests be from the tribe of Levi:

### Hebrews 7:16

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 [ἐντολή] concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life.

So, we should understand the “former commandment” in verse 18 to be a reference to the specific law that restricts the Levitical priesthood to the tribe of Levi, in particular to the sons of Aaron (Exodus 29:9). The scholar Mary Schmitt puts this point well:

The commandment in v. 18 is a physical requirement concerning who could serve as a priest. In the preceding verses, the author argues for the validity of a different priest, one whose lineage traced back to Judah, not Levi. He becomes a priest not on the basis of a law of physical requirement (ἐντολή) but according to the power of an indestructible life (7:16). Therefore, in vv. 18-19, the author calls for the setting aside of the weak and ineffective ἐντολή [“commandment”] concerning the lineage of priests in order to bring in a better hope.

—Mary Schmitt, “Restructuring Views on Law in Hebrews 7:12,” *JBL* 128, no. 1 (2009), 197

So, the author of Hebrews is not saying that the Law of Moses has been abolished. He is saying that the specific requirement that priests be from the tribe of Levi has been set aside. This requirement being set aside does mean that it is abolished since the author assumes its ongoing validity in the next chapter (Hebrews 8:4). This requirement still applies for the Levitical priesthood on earth. So, in what way is this requirement “set aside”? It is set aside as a requirement for serving in the heavenly priesthood. This goes right back to verse 12: “when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.” The heavenly priesthood has a different requirement for entry: the power of an indestructible life.

In what way is the legal requirement for serving in the Levitical priesthood “weak and useless”? It is weak and useless in regard to attaining perfection: “for the law made nothing perfect.” As we discussed earlier, the Levitical priesthood cannot fully take away sin and purify the consciences of believers because the priests are sinful, mortal men (Hebrews 7:23, 27-28). In contrast, the Messiah is sinless and immortal, so 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” (Hebrews 7:25).

So again, the requirement for serving in the Levitical priesthood is “weak and useless” *only* in regard to attaining perfection. But according to the author, it is still valid (Hebrews 8:4). While the Levitical

priesthood cannot attain “perfection,” from the author’s perspective, it still serves a legitimate function on earth—namely, designating priests to facilitate worship in the earthly tabernacle or temple. This earthly priestly service functions as a “shadow” of the heavenly service (Hebrews 9:23-28). As Thiessen writes:

[T]he Levitical priesthood and earthly cult are inferior to Christ’s priesthood and the celestial cult. But such a hierarchy does not abolish the Levitical priesthood or speak to its obsolescence...To participate in the earthly cult, one needs to have the flesh purified [Hebrews 9:13]. As long as this cult remains, and as long as both priests and lay people remain mortal, these purifications are neither cancelled nor obsolete.

—Matthew Thiessen, “Hebrews and the Jewish Law,” in *So Great a Salvation: A Dialogue on the Atonement in Hebrews*, ed. Jon C. Laansma, George H. Guthrie, and Cynthia Long Westfall (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2019), 191

From the perspective of the author of Hebrews, the earthly priesthood and animal sacrifices exist because humans are sinful and mortal, which are features of the present fallen age. Once the present age comes to an end and we enter the age to come, the Levitical priesthood and sacrificial system will “vanish away” (Hebrews 8:13). However, the present age, symbolized by the tabernacle, is “still standing” (Hebrews 9:8-9). Sin and death still exist. Hence, “[there are priests who offer gifts according to the law](#)” (Hebrews 8:4). That is, according to the author of Hebrews, the Levitical priesthood still serves a valid function and won’t vanish away until the present age does.

## Conclusion

The author of Hebrews does not reject the Levitical priesthood or the Torah; in fact, his entire argument for the legitimacy of the Messiah’s heavenly priesthood presupposes their validity. He argues that Yeshua, being from the tribe of Judah, cannot serve as a priest on earth due to the Torah’s regulations restricting the priesthood to the tribe of Levi. However, Yeshua’s priesthood is situated in heaven, where different qualifications apply, specifically “the power of an indestructible life.” This “[change in the law](#)” pertains to the heavenly realm and does not negate the earthly requirements for Levitical priests. Thus, the Levitical priesthood and the priestly laws remain valid on earth until the end of the present age.

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.*

*Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom!*

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**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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