

On the Basis of the Priesthood

Consider these intriguing words: ‘Under [the levitical priesthood] the people received the law’ (Heb. 7:11). At the very least, we may speak of a link between the levitical priesthood, the people and the law. In fact, it is much stronger than this. It was *under* the levitical priesthood that the people of Israel received the law. The NIV and the NASB use the word *basis*; the people received the law *on the basis* of the levitical priesthood. The writer does not say that on the basis of the law the people received the priesthood, but that on the basis of the priesthood the people received the law. I say again, what an intriguing statement!

For a start, as the writer to the Hebrews makes clear, only the Jews could have received the law, since no people could have the law without the levitical priesthood. Now who were under the levitical priesthood? The Jews. Only the Jews. No Gentiles had the levitical priesthood, nor any of the other old-covenant shadows – the sabbath, the sacrifices, the ark, the temple, the feasts, observance of the new moon, and so on. Gentiles were not under that covenant; it was not given to them; indeed, they were excluded from it unless they converted to Judaism (Ex. 12:48-49; Lev. 24:22; Num. 9:14; 15:15-16,29).

The same goes for the law. The Jews were the only people to have it (Deut. 4:1-2,5-8,12-14; 33:4; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 2:14; 3:1-2; 9:4; 1 Cor. 9:20-21). Under the levitical priesthood, on the basis of the levitical priesthood, the people of Israel – and they alone – received the law.

Now what ‘law’ is the writer thinking of? Without question, this can only be the law of Moses, the entire law of Moses. ‘Law’ cannot be confined to the so-called ceremonial law or ‘the law of priesthood’. The writer to the Hebrews knew nothing of this way of subdividing the law by any such construct. After all, the so-called tripartite division of the law was only invented centuries after the time of the apostles. Once it had been invented, of course, it became a handy template for those who wanted to get

round awkward passages of Scripture – awkward because they do not fit into their system of logic and theology, but, rather, destroy it. The same may be said today.

But the writer to the Hebrews knew nothing of this philosophical, non-scriptural invention. So when he talks about ‘the law’, ‘the law’ is what he means. Take just two examples. When he tells us that Moses declared ‘every commandment of the law... to all the people’ (Heb. 9:19), obviously he means every commandment of the entire law. And when he reminds his readers that ‘anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses’ (Heb. 10:28), he does not mean there are certain aspects of the law that are outside this solemn declaration.

Indeed, using glosses to circumvent Scripture amounts to the traducing of it. It smacks of the Pharisees who were so sternly rebuked by Christ for doing this very thing:

You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said: ‘Honour your father and your mother’; and: ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die’. But you say: ‘If a man tells his father or his mother: “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God) – then you no longer permit him to do [or let him escape from doing] anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do (Mark 7:9-13).

The same here.

The fact is, the entire law of Moses was given to the people of Israel, and they were given it on the basis of the levitical priesthood. This is what the writer to the Hebrews asserts.

John Calvin commented:

The law was annexed to the priesthood.

Excellent! The priesthood was not annexed to the law. No! The law was given to Israel on the basis of the priesthood.

John Owen, in his commentary on Hebrews, declared:

The levitical priesthood... was appointed by God, or confirmed by law, yet it was a far greater advancement that therewith the whole law was given, and thereon did depend, as [the writer] declares in the next verses... The whole law is intended... That whole law was given by the voice of God out of the tabernacle whereof Aaron was the minister... So that the people in the largest sense may be said to receive the law under that priesthood.¹

Just so!

Very well. Israel was given the law of Moses on the basis of the levitical priesthood.

Clearly, the two – priesthood and law – were inextricably linked (Heb. 7:11-12,14,18-19,22,28). The two stood or fell together, and all depended on the priesthood. If the priesthood was changed then – there was no choice about it – the law had to change too: ‘The priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law’ (Heb. 7:12). If the priesthood was temporary, so was the law of Moses. If the first fell, the second fell with it. If one was fulfilled, the other was fulfilled in and with it. If one was superseded, so was the other.

Now we know that Christ came and fulfilled the old priesthood, rendering it obsolete (Heb. 4:14 – 10:18). The same, therefore, goes for the Mosaic covenant and its entire law (Heb. 8:13).²

Calvin could hardly have been stronger when he said that Christ, by establishing his priesthood, abrogated, annulled or abolished the law:

Now, as some might doubt whether the abolition of the law followed the abolition of the priesthood, [the writer to the

¹ Alas, Owen then introduced Reformed glosses, and showing that he failed to grasp the full meaning of the text.

² See my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law; Redemption History through Covenants; Three Verses Misunderstood*. See also my *Priesthood: Our Need, God’s Provision ; Believers Under the Law of Christ*.

Hebrews] says that the law was not only brought in under it, but that it was also by it established.

The point is, the levitical priesthood – and, therefore, the Mosaic covenant and its law with it – was changed. More than that, Christ fulfilled the old covenant (with its law), rendering it obsolete, establishing his covenant – the new covenant – with his own law, all on the basis of his everlasting and effective priesthood.

Calvin again:

As the authority of the law and the priesthood is the same, Christ became not only a priest, but also a lawgiver; so that the right of Aaron, as well as of Moses, was transferred to him. The sum of the whole is that the ministry of Moses was no less temporary than that of Aaron; and hence both were annulled by the coming of Christ, for the one could not stand without the other... That law, as it was [that is, because it was] subordinate to the ancient priesthood, was abolished when [that] priesthood was abolished. And Christ, being made a priest, was invested also with the authority of a legislator, that he might be the teacher and interpreter of the new covenant.³

In short, Christ is his people's lawgiver in the new covenant, and he rules them by his own law, the law of Christ, on the basis of his priesthood.

Hence any talk of believers being under the law of Moses is totally unscriptural. It is as wide of the mark as saying believers are under the levitical priesthood, have to keep the sabbath, attend the temple, offer the sacrifices, and partake in the feasts. Hebrews 7:11-12 proves it:

Under [the levitical priesthood] the people received the law...
The priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law.

Indeed, to read the entire letter to the Hebrews puts the issue beyond doubt.

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Let me quote some of the more pertinent passages. Having made his statement in Hebrews 7:11-12, the writer then moves on to argue that Christ is a priest in the order of Melchizedek, not Aaron (Heb. 7:13-17). And this carries huge consequences:

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 (Heb. 7:18-19).

That is not all. Unlike Aaron, Christ was consecrated to his priesthood by God's oath (Heb. 7:20-21). And the consequence of that? Just this: 'This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant' (Heb. 7:22).

The writer then draws a stark contrast between Christ's priesthood and the levitical priesthood (Heb. 7:23-28), concluding with this:

The law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever (Heb. 7:28).

The writer goes straight on – there should be no chapter division:

Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tabernacle that the Lord set up, not man (Heb. 8:1-2).

This really is the point! It is the point of the argument in Hebrews. It is the point of my article.

What is more, as the writer to the Hebrews argues, all this shows that:

...Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

For he finds fault with them when he says: 'Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the

covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying: 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more'. In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away... Therefore [Christ] is the mediator of a new covenant... The law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities (Heb. 8:6-13; 9:15; 10:1).

The writer comes to his concluding exhortation:

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:28-29).

To sum up and apply all this: God gave Israel the Mosaic covenant and its law at Sinai, based upon the levitical priesthood. Christ came into the world under the Mosaic covenant and its law (Gal. 4:4), and fulfilled it (Matt. 5:17),⁴ thus establishing the new covenant under his everlasting and effective priesthood, removing all the shadows of the old covenant by bringing in their reality (Col. 2:17) – he being that reality. Thus Christ has become his people's lawgiver in the new covenant, ruling them by his own law, the law of Christ.

This is what I understand to be the theology of the new covenant.

⁴ See my *Believers*.