

## New Testament Texts and Contexts – General Epistles

As we survey the **General Epistles**, we find the Old Covenant Mosaic Law as main topic of discussion in the book of **Hebrews**. Therein it is contrasted with the new age of Messianic salvation that has dawned in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, very much like we saw in the Gospels and Acts. Of this discussion in **Hebrews** Thomas Schreiner writes; *“The author to the Hebrews engages a sustained argument against reverting to the Aaronic priesthood and the Levitical sacrificial cultus. He does not claim that the Mosaic Covenant was somehow a mistake from its inception. Instead, he hangs his argument on salvation-historical realities. Now that Christ has arrived as the Melkizedekian priest, a return to the Levitical priesthood would constitute a denial of Christ’s sacrifice. The Aaronic priesthood and the Old Testament sacrifices are not rejected wholesale, they are viewed typologically. The Old Testament priesthood and sacrifices pointed to and anticipated the sacrifice of Christ. They are shadows, He is the substance. The brute beasts offered in the Old Testament sacrifices cannot ultimately forgive, but Christ’s sacrifice is atoning since He is a willing and sinless victim. The repetition of Old Testament sacrifices reveals that they do not actually forgive sin, whereas the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ definitively and finally atones for sins.”* These statements are clearly seen to be in true in the text of Hebrews. The writer maintains that the Levitical priesthood was **unable to atone** for sins and **looked forward typologically** to Christ, His sacrifice, His priesthood, and to a **New and better covenant** at time later in history.

**Hebrews 10:1-4** - 1 For **the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things**, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near. 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? 3 But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. 4 For **it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins**. NASB

**Hebrews 10:9-12** - He takes away the first in order to establish the second. 10 By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. 11 And every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, **which can never take away sins**; 12 but He, having **offered one sacrifice for sins for all time**, sat down at the right hand of God, NASB

**Hebrews 9:8-10** - 8 The **Holy Spirit is signifying this**, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed, while the outer tabernacle is still standing, 9 **which is a symbol for the present time**.

Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, 10 since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body **imposed until a time of reformation**. NASB

**Hebrews 9:11-16** - 11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, **He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; 12 and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption**. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, 14 how much more **will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience** from dead works to serve the living God? 15 And for this reason **He is the mediator of a new covenant**, in order that since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. NASB

**Hebrews 8:6-7** - 6 But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as **He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises**. 7 **For if that first covenant had been faultless**, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. NASB

**Hebrews 8:13** - 13 When He said, **“A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete**. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear. NASB

The writer maintains that when the priesthood changes, it also changed the law that governed it.

**Hebrews 7:11-12** - 11 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? **12 For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also.** NASB

The Melchizedekian priesthood succeeded the Levitical priesthood as the **eternal** and **once-for-all mediation** prescribed by God Himself.

**Hebrews 7:23-28** - 23 And the former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers, because they were prevented by death from continuing, 24 but He, on the other hand, **because He abides forever, holds His priesthood permanently. 25 Hence, also, He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him**, since He always lives to make intercession for them. 26 For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; 27 who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people, **because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.** NASB

Therefore the Levitical Priesthood and the Ceremonial Law are seen as typological in a Redemptive-Historical sense. This is to say that they fit into a specific time period in redemptive history to be **fulfilled at a later time** and in a **greater way**. The Old gives way to the New and better plan of fulfillment that God has as the ages progress ever nearer to the consummation.

**Hebrews 9:23-25** - 23 Therefore it was necessary **for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.** 24 For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, **a mere copy of the true one**, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; NASB

Learn here then from the letter to the Hebrews, the clear **abrogation** of the **Ceremonial Law**, including the Levitical Priesthood, the temple sacrifices, the washings and consecrations and the other outward and ceremonial rites related to it. The Ceremonial aspects of the Law were only **temporary** and **ineffectual**. More than this, see that Christ is the actual long awaited **substance** of God's ultimate plan in history that was only a **shadow** in the Mosaic Covenant. It was Christ who provided a perfect mediation between God and man as the divinely appointed **High Priest**, whose once-for-all sacrifice is **effectual** to atone for sins to the uttermost, and whose Priesthood is **eternal**, for **"He ever lives to make intercession for us."** In Christ a New and better covenant has dawned which stands on better promises and provides complete atonement and eternal forgiveness for **"those who draw near to worship God through Him."**

The letter by **James**, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem council of elders, does mention the Law, but has a significant discussion about it. James does draw significantly from the Old Testament to drive home his points as the recipients of his letter are clearly identified as Jews. Notwithstanding we must understand that **James never mentions the ceremonial Law, circumcision, the Sabbath or food laws.** Instead he has a particular focus on obedience to the moral aspects of the Law and an emphasis on obedience to it. For example he maintains that if you **violate one portion** of the Law, you have transgressed the **entire Law**.

**James 2:10-12** - 10 For **whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.** 11 For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not commit murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12 So speak and so act, as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. NASB

Therefore James exhorts his hearers to obedience to the moral aspects of the Law. He has a particular focus on partiality, a bridled tongue, godly wisdom, rich oppression of the poor, and the care of orphans and widows. See in these James clearly drawing from the moral principles contained in the Old Testament and applying them to our life as a guide for walking in and doing God's will. In fact, this is the key to seeing how James views the Law. Apparently, He sees the Law as having been fulfilled in Christ, which has brought about a **salvation of the soul**, through the Gospel, **"the word of truth"** (v-1:18), and **"the implanted word"** (v-1:21). This **"implanted"**