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M I N I S T R I E S

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Is the Mosaic Covenant Obsolete? (Hebrews 8:13)

Should Christians keep commandments like the Sabbath, biblical festivals, and dietary laws? We have argued in numerous teachings that we should! But many disagree with this view.

One common objection is that these commandments don't apply to Christians living in the "New Covenant era." It is argued that commandments like the Sabbath are part of the Mosaic Covenant, or "Old Covenant." Christians are part of the New Covenant, which was inaugurated by the Messiah's work on the cross (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 9:15; 12:24). This New Covenant replaces the old Mosaic Covenant and renders it obsolete (Hebrews 8:6-13). Therefore, all the commandments associated with the "Old Covenant" are irrelevant to Christians, or so the argument goes.

Christian pastor Andy Stanley, who is infamous for saying that Christians must "unhitch" from the Old Testament Scriptures, articulates this view in his book *Irresistible*. Here is what he says:

Comparing Jesus' capacity as a priest to the priest down the street, [the author of Hebrews] writes: "But, in fact, the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises" (Hebrews 8:6). Note the compare-and-contrast terminology: "superior," "old," "new," "better" ... There's no mention of blending, mixing, or combining ... He continues: "For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another" (Hebrews 8:7). This is an extraordinary and unsettling statement. Apparently there was something wrong with the *old covenant*. If he's correct, the Bible says there's something wrong with part of the Bible ... He goes on to quote the prophet Jeremiah who predicted the old covenant would eventually be replaced by a new one ... The author of Hebrews says the new covenant rendered the old and everything associated with it *obsolete*.

-Andy Stanley, *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 151-153.

Does the author of Hebrews really teach that there's something wrong with part of the Bible, as Pastor Stanley alleges? Has the inauguration of the New Covenant rendered everything associated with the "Old Covenant" obsolete? No. We will unpack the passages from Hebrews later in this teaching, but first, let's establish what the Mosaic Covenant is.

The Mosaic Covenant

After God delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, he brought them to Mount Sinai and made a covenant with them (Deuteronomy 5:2). In that covenant, he promised to bring them to the land of Canaan and to dwell among them (Exodus 6:8; Leviticus 26:11-12). Israel would be his people, and he would be their God (Exodus 6:7). Additionally, Israel would be a kingdom of priests, representing God to the nations (Exodus 19:5-6). What were Israel's responsibilities in this covenant relationship? They had to follow the laws that God gave through Moses at Mount Sinai—the Torah.

This covenant with Israel is referred to as the Mosaic Covenant because Moses was the prophet through whom God spoke to the people of Israel when the covenant was established. It is sometimes referred to as the Sinai Covenant because it was established at Mount Sinai. Many people also refer to this covenant as the "Old Covenant" because it is contrasted with the "New Covenant" in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

The Mosaic Covenant is one of a few significant covenants between God and human individuals and groups. Notably, God made a covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:20-9:17), Abraham (Genesis 15:18; 17:3-21), Israel at Sinai (Exodus 19-24), and David (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89; 132). Each of these covenants is built upon the previous covenants, carrying God's plan of redemption forward. God preserves the world through Noah, launches his redemption plan through Abraham, establishes a holy people through Israel, and promises a Messianic king from the line of David. God's plan to bring salvation to the world through the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15) becomes more evident with every covenant, being ultimately fulfilled in the Messiah Yeshua.

All these covenants are called "everlasting" (Genesis 9:16; 17:3-7, 13, 19; 2 Samuel 23:5), including the Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 31:16; Leviticus 24:8; 1 Chronicles 16:14-18; Psalm 105:8-10). The Sabbath is given as the sign of the Mosaic covenant, which is commanded to be kept "as a covenant forever":

Exodus 31:16-17

Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the LORD [YHWH] made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.

However, according to Scripture, there was a need for a "New Covenant." Why? Was there something wrong with the Mosaic Covenant? Why was a New Covenant necessary?

The New Covenant

The prophet Jeremiah explained the reason for the New Covenant in one of his prophecies. Here is what he said:

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD [YHWH], when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and 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, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD [YHWH]. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD [YHWH]: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD [YHWH],’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD [YHWH]. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

So, this New Covenant is “not like” the Mosaic Covenant, which Israel broke. As Pastor Stanley noted, these two covenants are different. But in what way is this New Covenant different? Does YHWH say that he will give a different law for his people to keep? No. He says he will put his law, his Torah, within them and write it on their hearts. The Torah is not different in the New Covenant; what is different in the New Covenant is the people’s *response* to the Torah. Unlike the previous generations of Israelites, who had been repeatedly unfaithful to their covenant responsibilities, members of the New Covenant *will* be faithful. The Torah that God will write on his people’s hearts in the New Covenant is the same Torah he wanted to be on their hearts all along:

Deuteronomy 6:6

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart.

Deuteronomy 11:18

You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.

Also, we don’t see anything in Jeremiah 31:31-34 about the Mosaic Covenant being replaced or abolished. Like the other biblical covenants, the New Covenant is built upon the previous covenants. In fact, the New Covenant directly reinforces the promises of the Mosaic Covenant. Despite Israel’s unfaithfulness, YHWH still plans to bring Israel back to the Promised Land and dwell among them as their God. These promises were part of the Mosaic Covenant. As scholar F.C. Holmgren writes:

The prophet speaks to them of a “new” covenant, but, as most scholars admit, this “new” covenant has the same character as the Mosaic covenant.

-F.C. Holmgren, *The Old Testament and the Significance of Jesus: Embracing Change—Maintaining Christian Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 91

Once again, according to the text, the only thing that appears to be “not like” the Mosaic Covenant is the people’s response. In the New Covenant, God will write the Torah on their hearts, generating the proper response. Other prophecies in the Bible reveal that he will accomplish this by putting his Spirit within them (Ezekiel 36:22-32).

Christian scholar, Dr. Carmen Imes, puts this point well:

Why do they need a new covenant? The reason is clear. Not because there was something wrong with the Sinai covenant. Simply “because they broke my covenant.” The problem was with the people ... the covenant hasn’t changed. It involves the same partners **and the same law**. The difference is that God will enable every Israelite to internalize it. Yahweh said earlier that “Judah’s sin is engraved with an iron tool...on the tablets of their hearts” (Jeremiah 17:1). Their

sin occupies the center of their thinking, feeling, and decision making. When the covenant is renewed, their center of gravity will be the Torah instead: It will be written on their hearts.

-Carmen Imes, *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters* (InterVarsity Press, 2019), 128-129

So, contrary to Pastor Stanley's claims, there is nothing wrong with the Mosaic Covenant. According to Jeremiah, the problem was the people's failure to be faithful to it. That is what the New Covenant is designed to fix.

What is becoming obsolete in Hebrews?

If the Mosaic Covenant and the Torah were not abolished or replaced, how do we make sense of certain passages from the Book of Hebrews? For instance, look at what it says in Hebrews 8:

Hebrews 8:6-7

But as it is, 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.

Does the author of Hebrews teach that the Mosaic Covenant and everything associated with it is faulty? That's what this passage seems to say on the surface. What's more, the author of Hebrews goes on to quote Jeremiah 31:31-34 and then says something else that many interpret to mean that the Mosaic Covenant has been rendered obsolete. Here is what he says:

Hebrews 8:13

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.

That seems pretty cut and dried. The "Old Covenant" was faulty and needed to be replaced. In light of the New Covenant, the Old Covenant is rendered obsolete. However, a closer look at these verses tells a different story.

Before we get there, it should be noted that even if Hebrews 8 *did* teach that the Mosaic Covenant was abolished, that still would not mean that the Torah—God's law—was abolished. As we saw earlier, a central promise of the New Covenant is that the Torah would be written on believers' hearts. So regardless of what Scripture might say about the Mosaic Covenant, the New Covenant reaffirms the Torah's ongoing validity. But what about the Mosaic Covenant? Was it really rendered obsolete? No.

Let's consider Hebrews 8:6-7. As Christian scholar R.L. Watson points out, the words "the old" in Hebrews 8:6 do not appear in the original Greek or any textual variants. Watson writes:

The original text for verse six can be best rendered as: "But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant." Thus, the translators have added 'old' to the translated text. So, to say that this passage is even talking about 'the old covenant' is inaccurate.

-R.L. Watson, *Forgotten Covenant* (Port Orchard, WA: Ark House Press, 2021), 239-240

Watson goes on to explain that the word “covenant” in verses 7 and 13 also does not appear in the original Greek but was added by translators. When we read these verses without the added words, it significantly impacts how the text can be read. Watson continues:

And when we read these verses, in context, without the added words, it becomes apparent the author of Hebrews wasn’t even trying to compare the totality of the Mosaic Covenant with the New Covenant … after discussing the superiority of Christ’s High Priestly ministry into the Heavenly Places over those who minister in the Temple in verses 1-5, the author has said that Christ has a greater *ministry*. This is the context. What this means is that when the author continues, he is saying that because of the faultiness of the first *ministry*, a second superior *ministry* (Christ’s) was needed. The ministry of the priests who served in the Tabernacle and Temple was sufficient for its earthly and temporal purpose, however, it did nothing for humanity’s sinful condition. Indeed, it was never intended to do so.

-R.L. Watson, *Forgotten Covenant* (Port Orchard, WA: Ark House Press, 2021), 240

So, it appears that the author of Hebrews is not comparing the Old Covenant with the New Covenant in Hebrews 8. He is comparing the earthly priesthood with Messiah’s heavenly priesthood. The overall context, chapters 7-10, is all about this comparison.

The grammar of Hebrews 8:6-7 also suggests that the comparison is between priesthoods. The main sentence in verse 6 is, “**But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent…**” The rest of the verse, about him mediating a better covenant enacted on better promises, is subordinate to his main point: Christ’s ministry in heaven is more excellent than the Levitical ministry on earth. Then verse 7 follows up, “**For if that first had been faultless…**” If that first *what* had been faultless? Remember, the word “covenant” does not appear in the Greek in verse 7. In Greek, there is no noun after “first,” so we must determine what the author is referring to from the context and sentence structure. When we track the main clause in the previous verse—that is, when we recognize that the author’s main point in verse 6 is about Messiah’s *ministry* being more excellent—it makes the most sense to say, “that first ministry” instead of “that first covenant.” The fault is not with the covenant but with the Levitical ministry.

Additionally, the author’s statement in Hebrews 8:7 is a reiteration of one of his earlier statements:

Hebrews 8:7

For if that first [ministry] had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

Hebrews 7:11

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood…what further need would there have been for another priest to arise…

This parallel further suggests that the author’s point in this section is to compare ministries. So, again, the fault is not with the Old Covenant; the fault is with the earthly Levitical priests. That’s why in verse 8, right before the author quotes Jeremiah, he says:

Hebrews 8:8

For he finds fault with them when he says…

The author does not say he finds fault with *it*, that is, the covenant. No, he says he finds fault with *them*.

What is wrong with the Levitical priesthood? As the author explains, the Levitical Priesthood has a legitimate role serving in the earthly tabernacle (Hebrews 8:3-5). The issue, however, is that Levitical priests are human. They have weaknesses, they sin, and grow old and die (Hebrews 5:2; 7:22-23, 28; 9:7). Because of this, their sacrifices cannot truly deal with humanity's sinful condition (Hebrews 9:9-10; 10:11). Only the sinless and immortal heavenly High Priest can accomplish this (Hebrews 7:11). Only the Messiah can inaugurate the New Covenant, make complete atonement for sins, and enable the Torah to be written on the hearts of God's people in accordance with the New Covenant promises:

Hebrews 8:10 (cf. Jeremiah 31:33)

I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts...

Hebrews 8:12 (cf. Jeremiah 31:34)

For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.

To be clear, the Levitical Priesthood has a valid role *on earth*. It has a specific job to do, and it is well suited to do that job. A cooking stove is useful to cook food with, but it is useless when it comes to changing a car tire. In the same way, the Levitical priesthood is useful in their role of officiating at the earthly tabernacle, but useless when it comes to establishing these New Covenant promises—making complete atonement for sin and writing the Torah on the hearts of the people. The author's point here is that the Levitical Priesthood cannot do what only the Messiah's heavenly priesthood is designed to do.

Now that we see that the author is comparing the earthly and heavenly priesthoods, and not the Mosaic and New covenants, we can understand what he means in verse 13:

Hebrews 8:13

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.

Remember, the word "covenant" is not actually in the Greek text here. As Watson writes:

Now, this insertion of 'covenant' is not completely dishonest since the context of quoting Jeremiah 31 means it was a reference to the New Covenant. But why was it left out here? It seems that by leaving it out, the author of Hebrews was reinforcing that what was in view here was a comparison of ministries, not covenants. Thus, here, as in verse 7, 'the first' that was faulty and becoming obsolete is the earthly priestly ministry, and not the Law, nor the Mosaic Covenant, with the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

-R.L. Watson, *Forgotten Covenant* (Port Orchard, WA: Ark House Press, 2021), 242

So, what does the author of Hebrews say is "becoming obsolete and growing old and ready to vanish away"? Once again, it is not the Mosaic Covenant. *It is the earthly priesthood*.

Consider the historical context. We know from the gospel accounts that there was corruption within the priesthood. Some Jewish sects, like the Qumran community, protested the Jerusalem temple because they believed it had become irredeemably corrupt. So, we can assume that many people at this time recognized that the earthly priesthood was not functioning the way it was supposed to because of fallen men. During his earthly ministry, Yeshua even prophesied the Temple's eventual destruction (Luke

21:5-6), which occurred in 70 AD.

The book of Hebrews was likely written in the early 80's AD, some years after the Temple was destroyed (Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle of the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984], pp. 14-16). For a short time after the Temple's destruction, we know from Josephus (*Contra Apion*. 2.6.23) and the Mishnah (m.*Pesachim* 7.2) that the priesthood still functioned in a limited capacity, but they no longer offered public sacrifices. They were, as it says in Hebrews 8:13, "ready to vanish away." According to Alexander Guttmann:

When the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the public sacrifices were completely terminated. However, some of the private sacrifices were, for a short period, still offered on a limited scale. With the possible exception of Gamaliel II, no rabbi is known to have offered any sacrifice after 70 CE. However, the cessation of the sacrificial cult was not an inevitable consequence of the destruction of the Temple as shown in the light of past precedents.

-Alexander Guttmann, "The End of the Sacrificial Jewish Cult" *HUCA* 38 (1967), 147

When you consider the historical situation, you can see why the author of Hebrews feels the need to explain what God's people should do without an earthly priesthood. It was literally about to cease to exist. What's more, the Greek phrase "he has made obsolete" (*pepalaioken*) in Hebrews 8:13 does not mean to abolish or cancel. Instead, it has the meaning of wearing out, no longer able to function as designed (LSJ, "παλαιόω," 1290). For example, this same word is used earlier in Hebrews to describe garments that have become worn out (Hebrews 1:11). Within the historical circumstances in which the author of Hebrews wrote, the earthly priesthood could not function the way it was designed to function.

The author of Hebrews is writing to encourage his readers to stay faithful to the Messiah (Hebrews 10:32-34). He is trying to reassure them that, even if the Temple is destroyed and the priesthood can't function the way it was intended, it's okay. We have a High Priest serving in the heavenly tabernacle! The earthly priesthood is a shadow of the heavenly reality! So regardless of what happens with the earthly Temple and priesthood, the Messiah's heavenly High Priesthood endures forever.

This is a great encouragement to us today as well. Often, earthly institutions, including religious ones, can become corrupt or simply just fall apart because they are made up of fallen, sinful people who grow old and die. It is so easy to want to put your identity and security in earthly things—even good things, like ministry. But the problem is that, when those things inevitably wear out and vanish away, as earthly things do, we can sometimes lose our sense of identity and security. The author of Hebrews reminds us that our true source of security and hope is not in any earthly institution, but rather in the Messiah's heavenly High Priesthood. His priesthood does not vanish away.

So, in chapter 8 of Hebrews, the author is not comparing covenants but priesthoods. While the Levitical priesthood serves a legitimate role on earth, it is made up of mortal, sinful men, so it cannot accomplish what the Messiah's priesthood can. Only the Messiah's priesthood can make complete atonement for sin and enable the Torah to be written upon the people's hearts. Moreover, in light of the Temple's destruction, the earthly priesthood is wearing out and ready to vanish away. It is not being abolished or canceled in a theological sense, but it is going to physically cease to be. In any case, these passages from Hebrews do not teach that the Mosaic Covenant has been rendered obsolete.

In conclusion, God's covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai is an everlasting covenant. According to Jeremiah 31:31-34, the New Covenant does not render the Mosaic Covenant obsolete nor abolish the

Torah. Instead, what is different in the New Covenant is that the people will respond to the Torah differently—the Torah will be written on their hearts, empowering them to do it. The author of Hebrews does not teach that the Mosaic Covenant is abolished, but rather affirms Jeremiah's prophecy about the Torah being written on the heart (Hebrews 8:10). The author does not teach that the Mosaic Covenant is faulty, but rather that the earthly priesthood is faulty because it is made up of fallen men who cannot accomplish what only Messiah's heavenly High Priesthood can accomplish. What is becoming obsolete, growing old, and ready to vanish away in Hebrews 8:13, is not the Mosaic covenant but rather the earthly priesthood. The earthly priesthood becoming “obsolete” does not mean that it was canceled or abolished but rather it has worn out and is not able to function as designed due to the historical circumstances.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

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