

# Reconsidering 'law' in Hebrews

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In this contribution, the notion that the concept of 'law' in the Letter to the Hebrews only pertains to the cultic domain is challenged against the discourse on law in the whole letter. Apart from instances in which the law includes moral aspects of the law, the broader theological context in which the concept of 'law' is set in Hebrews suggests that the whole Mosaic system is in view throughout the letter. Such a conclusion is drawn on the basis of pertinent contrasts in the letter between the old and new covenants, between the different sources of revelation, between Moses and Jesus, between the ways in which priesthood and sacrifices function in relation to sin, between the outward or physical and the inward or spiritual, and between die earthly and heavenly domains of the respective covenantal systems.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This article primarily makes a contribution in respect of biblical exegesis and New Testament theology. In addition, the article reconsiders the discourse on law in the Letter to the Hebrews, which impacts the way in which Christians understand their relationship to the Mosaic Law. It thus impacts the field of systematic theology. The relationship of the believer with the Mosaic Law in Hebrews also impacts church history: It provides us with information on the position of the early church towards the Mosaic Law, as well as how we understand the so-called 'parting of the ways' between Christianity and Judaism.

**Keywords:** Hebrews; law; identity; Torah; covenant; supersession; cultic; priesthood.

## Introduction

Traditionally, the majority of interpreters understand νόμος ('law') in the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 7:5, 12, 16, 19, 28; 8:4, 10; 9:19, 22; 10:1, 8, 16, 28) as referring to the whole Mosaic Law (e.g. Bruce 1990; Hughes 1977; Lane 1991a; O'Brien 2010; Ribbens 2016:146; cf. Gordon 2008; Haber 2005; Thompson 2008, 2011; Tönges 2005). Hebrews 7:12 is normally perceived as a *crux interpretum* in this regard. In this verse, the author argues that the change of priesthood, from the Levitical priesthood to Jesus Christ as the new high priest for believers, implies a change or transformation (μετάθεσις) of νόμος. If νόμος points to the whole Mosaic Law, it implies that more than the sacrificial cult or laws about priesthood has changed, but that the whole Mosaic system has changed, including purity laws and moral laws. It has recently been argued, however, that νόμος only refers to the priestly law and not to the whole Mosaic system (e.g. Allen 2010; Joslin 2008:168–169; Regev 2017; Schmitt 2009; Thiessen 2019). According to this approach, the author and addressees are considered as remaining fully Torah observant in respect of laws that usually mark off identity, such as Sabbath observance, dietary laws and circumcision. In other words, in having Jesus as their new high priest, followers of Jesus did not undergo a fundamental change of identity but remained fully Torah observant. In this article, the arguments of the view that νόμος only refers to the priestly law and that the rest of the Mosaic Law remained to be effective for the addressees will be tested against the discourse on law, as well as references to the Mosaic covenantal system in the whole letter. The discussion on law will mainly revolve around the various underlying contrasts between Jesus' ministry and the Mosaic legal system in the Letter to the Hebrews. After this discussion, the view of those who confine νόμος to cultic laws or laws concerning priesthood will be addressed.

## Arguments for νόμος as only referring to the priestly law

Mary Schmitt (2009) argued that Hebrews 7:18–19, which speaks of the abrogation (ἀθέτησις, v. 18) of the former ἐντολή ('commandment', v. 18) and the νόμος that made nothing perfect (v. 19), should not be read with 7:11–17. She understands γάρ ('for') in both verses 11 and 18 as introducing a parenthetical phrase that expounds on the preceding clause and not as denoting the limits of a distinct argument between these verses. In other words, verses 18 and 19 should be read with what follows and not as the author's proclamation that the Mosaic Law has been abrogated. According to Schmitt, the author is only concerned with the specific set of laws that pertain to

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the requirements for priesthood. Νόμος (v. 19) and ἐντολή (v. 18) would thus refer to the same entity: the requirement for becoming a priest. According to verse 11, people received the law (νομοθετέω) ἐπὶ the Levitical priesthood. The word ἐπὶ in this verse is, indeed, difficult to translate. The most common translations of this word are 'under' (YLT; RV; KJV; WEB; NKJV; NRSV; HCSB; ESV) and 'on the basis of' (NEB; REB; GNB; NASB; cf. NRSV; ISV).<sup>1</sup> Schmitt translates ἐπὶ with 'concerning': people received the law 'concerning' the Levitical priesthood (so Lane 1991a:174). She argues that the dominant interpretation of ἐπὶ in verse 11, which is to translate ἐπὶ with 'under', is contradicted by verse 28 in which νόμος (X2) specifically pertains to the Levitical priesthood. She thus concludes that νόμος in Hebrews 7:11 pertains to the Levitical priesthood specifically and not to the whole Mosaic Law.

Regev (2017) argued that the change of law in Hebrews 7:12 is limited to the change of high priestly descent. He further argued that the references to Jeremiah 31:31–34 (38:31–34, LXX) in Hebrews 8:10 and 10:16 do not refer to a new covenant as such, but rather to a new way of prescribing the same covenant – a way in which the Mosaic Law is internalised. In Regev's reading, there is thus no replacement of the Mosaic Law. In reference to 10:28, he argues that the punishment for the rejection of the Law is still in place for the addressees. He also reads the reference to the transgression and disobedience in 2:2 as an implicit reference to the ongoing obligation to fulfil the Mosaic Law. The reference in the letter to the Sabbath rest (4:9) and the reference to tithing according to the Law (7:5) are also interpreted as implicit references to the continued validity of the Mosaic Law. Although Regev perceives the sacrificial system, the temple and priesthood to have changed in light of the Christ event, he holds that the author and his addressees still observe all other Mosaic laws. He argues that no non-cultic law is criticised anywhere in the letter.

Similarly, Thiessen (2019) argued that there is no evidence in the Letter to the Hebrews that the author rejects ritual and cultic aspects of the Mosaic Law. Hebrews 10:28 is also read in such a way that the punishment for rejecting the Mosaic Law remains to have continued applicability. According to Thiessen, even the priestly law continues to be valid, with the difference being that the realm in which that priesthood operates has changed its location from an earthly realm to a heavenly realm. In support, he argues that the idea of a celestial priesthood and temple in which the earthly priesthood mimics and derives its authority from the heavenly priesthood was widespread in ancient texts (see, for example, Ragavan 2013). Similar to the above interpreters, he thus concludes that the νόμος that has changed (7:12) only pertains to the Levitical priesthood. The addressees thus still belong to Israel and continues to be fully Torah observant.

1. Bauer et al. (2000 [BDAG]:s.v. ἐπὶ, §8) interpret ἐπὶ in Hebrews 7:11 as being 'a marker of perspective', which they translate with 'on the basis of' (similarly Blass, Debrunner & Funk 1961 [BDF]:§234 [8]). Apart from the translations mentioned, Lane (1991a:174) lists the translation 'in association with' as a possibility.

## Contrasts between Jesus' ministry and the Mosaic legal system

In preparing to answer the above approach, it has to be noted that right through the Letter to the Hebrews, an underlying contrast between the Jesus' ministry and the Mosaic system can be detected. This basic contrast involves more than a contrast between the nature of the priestly ministry and the sacrificial system under Moses and Jesus, but seems to stretch much wider. As discussed below, various specific contrasts can be identified in this regard, which can be divided into four main aspects: (1) a contrast between the sources of revelation; (2) a contrast between the glory of Moses and Jesus; (3) a contrast between the two covenantal systems; and (4) finally, the way in which the author speaks about Sabbath and foods seems to be at odds with the continued observance of Sabbath days and food laws.

### Different sources of revelation

Right at the start of the Letter to the Hebrews, God who spoke to the patriarchs by the prophets is contrasted with God speaking by his Son in the last days (Heb 1:1–2), which implies a contrast between the source(s) of revelation of the old and the new epoch. Cockerill (2012:89) argued that although God's revelation through the Son stands in continuity with the revelation via the prophets in the Old Testament, God's revelation in Christ 'fulfills and thus surpasses his previous revelation' (cf. Allen 2010; Attridge 1989:38; Guthrie 1983:67; Johnson 2006:64; O'Brien 2010:48; Thompson 2008:36–37), which also implies discontinuity with the previous epoch. The author's reference to God's speech 'in these last days' (ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν, v. 2) provides an eschatological orientation to the Christ event (Allen 2010; Koester 2008:177; Lane 1991a:10; O'Brien 2010:50) that stands in contrast with the old age. Furthermore, according to 1:2, God created the world through the Son, signifying Christ's pre-existence (cf. O'Brien 2010:47) and his divinity, and thus, his supremacy. In 2:2, the author refers to ἀγγέλων λαληθείς λόγος, 'the message/word declared by angels' whereby every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, which certainly points to the Mosaic Law that was revealed on Mount Sinai (e.g. Allen 2010; Cockerill 2012:108; Gordon 2008:63; Johnson 2006:87; O'Brien 2010:84–85; Thompson 2008:57). However, God's revelation through angels (2:2) is on the same level as his revelation by the prophets (1:1), and thus, conveys the situation before the Son's incarnation in anticipation of the fulfilment of the Sinai covenant by the Son (3:6; 8:1–10:18; Cockerill 2012:108; cf. Lane 1991a:38).

### A contrast between the glory of Moses and Jesus

The most explicit contrast between Moses and Jesus comes in Hebrews 3:3, in which the author states that Jesus has been counted worthy of more 'glory' (δόξα) than Moses. The glory of Jesus is not only of a higher degree but also of a

superior kind, which the author illustrates by a common proverb of comparing Jesus' glory with the builder of a house whose glory surpasses that of the house. Whereas Moses was part of the house (God's people) being built by God, the image points to the house being established by Christ as God in the new era. Christ thus provides redemption and thereby surpasses Moses, just as the Redeemer surpasses the redeemed (Cockerill 2012:137). Jesus is thus pictured as superior to Moses (Ellingworth 1993:203; Lane 1991a:77; cf. Bruce 1990:92). The reference in 3:4 to God being the builder of all things implies that Christ also surpasses Moses in being Moses' creator (Cockerill 2012:137). A few verses down, there is also a reference to the rebellious people who came out of Egypt that was led by Moses (3:16), which arguably points to the inferiority of Moses' leadership (Guthrie 1983:113).

### A contrast between two covenantal systems

In Hebrews, the contrast between the two covenantal systems in the old and new era is probably the most profound contrast to be noticed in the letter. This contrast consists of several aspects, which can be categorised as follows: (1) the way in which the two covenantal systems are characterised; (2) the different realms in which they function; (3) the way in which works, transgressions and morality operate; and (4) the way in which priesthood, sacrifices and forgiveness of sin function, and (5) the way in which salvation functions.

In respect of the way in which the two covenants are characterised, there are some explicit contrasting descriptions in the letter. The concept of *διαθήκη*, which can be translated as either 'covenant' or 'testament', depending on the context, is used 17 times in the Letter to the Hebrews (7:22; 8:6, 8, 9 [X2], 10; 9:4 [X2], 15 [X2], 16, 17, 20; 10:16, 29; 12:24; 13:20; cf. Johnson 2006:192). The covenant in the era under Christ's high priesthood is described as a 'new' (*καινός*, 8:8, 13; 9:15; *νέος*, 12:24), a 'better' (*κρείσσων*, 7:22; 8:6; cf. 12:24) and an 'everlasting' (*αἰώνιος*, 13:20) covenant. In contrast, the covenant under Moses is described as an 'obsolete' (*παλαιόω*, 8:13) covenant, as 'growing old' (*γηράσκω*, 8:13) and as a 'first' (*πρῶτος*, 9:15) covenant. All these descriptions in these texts directly qualify *διαθήκη*.

There are, however, other descriptions that are not explicitly linked to the concept of *διαθήκη*, but, given the context in which they occur, are also characterising the respective covenantal systems. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that the concepts of *νόμος* ('law') and *ἐντολή* ('commandment') are identified or at least in close relationship with the concept of *διαθήκη*, which especially becomes clear in Hebrews 7:22. After the author reported on the changing of *νόμος* (7:12), contrasted 'the law of a fleshly commandment' (*νόμον ἐντολῆς σαρκίνης*) with 'the power of an endless life' (*δύναμιν ζωῆς ἀκαταλύτου*, 7:16), stated that the 'former commandment' (*προαγοῦσης ἐντολῆς*) is annulled (7:18) and declared that 'the law' (*νόμος*) made nothing perfect (7:19), he states that 'Jesus has become a surety of a better covenant' (7:22). The 'better covenant' (*κρείττονος*

*διαθήκης*) is directly contrasted with high priesthood under the Mosaic system (cf. Hughes 1977:267; Kistemaker 1984:202). Similarly, in 8:6 a 'better covenant' (*κρείττονός... διαθήκης*) is contrasted with priests who offer gifts 'according to the law' (*κατὰ νόμον*, 8:4).

Probably most significantly, however, in quoting Jeremiah 31:33 (38:33, LXX) in both 8:10 and 10:16, a pertinent connection is established between God's laws (*νόμους μου*: 'My laws') and the new *διαθήκη* that God will make with his people in the last days. Whilst some argue that the writing of God's laws in people's hearts and minds in 8:10 and 10:16 simply refers to a reaffirmation of the Mosaic laws (e.g. Allen 2010; Joslin 2008; Regev 2017), it is a question how the reaffirmation of the Mosaic Law could represent a new covenant, especially in light of the contrasts between the two covenants and between Jesus and Moses in the letter. As Johnson (2006:208–209) argues, the new covenant is not based on external observance and mediated instruction, but on God's direct accomplishment for all. In other words, the law written on people's hearts and minds cannot imply a mere memorisation of a set of written laws, but imply accomplishment by God himself (Bruce 1990:189; O'Brien 2010:298; cf. Koester 2008:387). The way in which the new covenant functions in respect of morality thus implies that it cannot be a mere reaffirmation of a set of *externally written* precepts. The idea that the Mosaic covenant is fulfilled yet replaced by a new one is confirmed by Jesus being pictured as the mediator of a better covenant, which stands in contrast with Moses who was the mediator of the Law covenant (e.g. Attridge 1989:221; Bruce 1990:185; Hughes 1977:296; Koester 2008:378; O'Brien 2010:292). Similarly, the declaration in 8:13 that the old covenant, *which includes all of God's laws* (8:10), is growing old and is becoming obsolete, which confirms both the fulfilment and replacement of the Mosaic covenant by the new (cf. Bruce 1990:194; Hughes 1977:300). Rather than pointing to a reaffirmation of the Mosaic written code, the references to God's laws in 8:10 and 10:6 point to carrying out 'God's will', such as is explicitly stated in 10:7, 9, 36 and 13:21, which would involve the exercising of discernment (5:14).

In several instances, the Mosaic sacrificial system is characterised as inferior to the dispensation under Christ's high priesthood. In Hebrews 7:11, the Levitical priesthood is portrayed as imperfect. According to 8:4–5, the gifts that the priests offer 'according to the law' (*κατὰ νόμον*, v. 4) are considered to be 'the copy and the shadow of the heavenly things' (*ὑποδείγματι καὶ σκιᾷ ... τῶν ἐπουρανίων*, v. 5). As a consequence, in 8:7, the first covenant is portrayed as not being 'faultless' (*ἄμειπτος*). In 9:8–9, the Holiest of All in the tabernacle is portrayed as 'symbolic for the present time' (*παραβολὴ εἰς τὸν καιρὸν τὸν ἐνεστηκότα*, v. 9), which seems to be a wider concept than merely a reference to the cultic realm. It points to a situation where external, fleshly ordinances are of no significance (9:10) and includes a new conscience (9:9, 14), implying a new way of relating to God in which God's holy presence does not have a cultic status any more

(cf. Lane 1991b:223) but forms part of a whole new way of existence. In 10:1, 'the law' (ὁ νόμος) is pictured as a 'shadow' (σκιά) of the good things to come, which especially implies that the Mosaic sacrificial system anticipates a new sacrificial system, but on the basis of references to sins (10:2–3, 8, 11) includes morality and arguably stretches wider than the sacrificial system itself (cf. Hughes 1977:389; Kistemaker 1984:272).

In contrast with the way in which the Mosaic system is characterised, the author's emphases on faith (6:12; 10:22; 11:1–39), grace (4:16; 12:15; 13:25) and endless life (7:16; 10:26) are all akin to the new covenant. These aspects also overlap with an implicit contrast between love and good works (10:24) on the one side, and dead works (6:1; 9:14) on the other (see below).

The second aspect of the contrast between the two covenantal systems pertains to the different realms in which they function. Believers' calling is portrayed as being 'heavenly' (ἐπουράνιος, 3:1). The Holy Spirit is considered to be a 'heavenly' (6:4) gift. Christ, the new high priest, is seated in 'heaven' (οὐρανός) at God's right hand (8:1), and he has entered 'heaven' in the presence of God on believers' behalf (9:24). Conversely, the old covenant is pictured as a copy and shadow of the 'heavenly' things (8:5), and the sacrificial system 'according to the law' (κατὰ τὸν νόμον) is considered as copies of the 'heavenly' things (9:22–23). The land promise under the old covenant is contrasted with a 'better' (κρείσσω), 'heavenly' land (11:16). Significantly, believers are pictured as having come to the Mount Zion of the living God and the 'heavenly' Jerusalem, which is compared with the earthly Mount Sinai (12:20–22). As a consequence, believers are now enrolled in 'heaven' (12:23). This contrast between the earthly and heavenly mountains is noteworthy, in that Mount Sinai signified the reception of the Mosaic Law, which includes all the moral laws, and thus, stretches wider than the cultic sphere. Conversely, Jesus' high priesthood is pictured as not being on 'earth' (γῆ, 8:4), and the first covenant is pictured as having an 'earthly' or 'worldly' (κοσμικός) place of holiness (9:1). Under the Mosaic system, people were warned from 'earth', whereas God's people are now warned from 'heaven' (12:25). Finally, the 'human' or 'earthly' (σάρξ) fathers who disciplined the people is compared with the Father 'of spirits' (τῶν πνευμάτων) who disciplined his people in the new covenant. There thus exists a clear contrast between the earthly realm of the old covenant and the heavenly realm of the new covenant.

In a similar way, the Levitical priesthood is portrayed as being subject to a 'fleshly commandment' (ἐντολῆς σαρκίνης, 7:16), which relates to the high priest under the Mosaic system being subjected to human genealogy (7:3, 6). In the same way, cultic rituals are pictured as being 'fleshly ordinances' (δικαιώματα σαρκός, 9:10) in contrast with Christ who came as High Priest 'of the good things that have come' (τῶν γενομένων ἀγαθῶν) of the greater, more perfect tabernacle (9:11), which implies a heavenly, spiritual ministry.

The third aspect of the contrast between the two covenantal systems concerns the way in which works, transgressions and morality operate. In Hebrews, the idea is advanced that people in the new covenant repent or cleanse their conscience 'from dead works' (ἀπὸ νεκρῶν ἔργων, 6:1; 9:14). The 'dead works' could be associated with the Levitical priesthood, such as washings and fleshly ordinances (see esp. 9:10; e.g. Lane 1991a:140), or it could pertain to any works under the Mosaic system (cf. Guthrie 1983:141; Johnson 2006:159). Another interpretation is that the dead works signify sin (e.g. Attridge 1989:164; Bruce 1990:140; Koester 2008:304; cf. Ellingworth 1993:458).<sup>2</sup> If so, there is still a connection with the Mosaic Law, in that sin directly relates to breaking the Mosaic Law. The author wants the congregants to move beyond repentance from 'dead works' and to cleanse their conscience from 'dead works'. As Bruce (1990:140) points out, repentance from sins was insisted upon in the Old Testament, as well as other literature from the second temple (e.g. Damascus Document 4.2). The 'dead works' can thus either be associated with the works that are performed in the era under the Mosaic system (see esp. 9:10–14) or be sinful works that broke the Mosaic Law (esp. 6:1), for ultimately 'dead works' should be transcended by serving the living God (9:14), love for others and good works based on the unwavering confession of hope (10:23–24). In fact, there is an interesting reference in 9:15 to the mediator of the new covenant (Christ) who redeems people from 'the transgressions under the first covenant' (ἐπὶ τῇ πρώτῃ διαθήκῃ παραβάσεων), implying that different criteria were applied for transgressions in the first covenant, which, in turn, means that sin and morality in the new covenant are not dependent on the written Mosaic code. In the same vein, according to 10:16–17, the old covenant people's 'sins' and 'lawless deeds' (ἀνομία) are contrasted with God's laws of the new covenant. It seems thus that according to Hebrews, sin and morality are being redefined in that they are not defined by the Mosaic Law any more.

It is significant that according to Hebrews 10:19–20, which follows the quotation from Jeremiah 31:33–34 (38:33–34, LXX), the addressees are invited to enter the Holiest with boldness 'by a new and living way' (ὁδὸν πρόσφατον καὶ ζῶσαν), which implies that the way in which God's laws in the new covenant are fulfilled, coheres with a new way of relating to God, which includes assurance of faith, a clean conscience, a confession of hope, love and good works (10:22–24). There is no appeal to a renewed commitment to the precepts of the Mosaic Law, which arguably suggests that the precepts of the Mosaic Law belong to the previous era. Rather than an appeal to the addressees to adhere to the Mosaic Law, they are called to do 'God's will' (10:7, 9; 10:36; 13:21) and to exercise their senses to discern good and evil (5:14).

The fourth aspect of the difference between the two covenantal systems is the way in which priesthood, sacrifices

<sup>2</sup>Kissi and Van Eck (2017:4) argued that 'dead works' point to the congregants' former participation in sacrificing to the gods & veneration of the emperor, but it is difficult to confirm such a notion from the evidence that we have in the letter.

and forgiveness of sin function. An important factor in this equation is the fact that there exists a pertinent link between the sacrificial and moral dimensions of the Mosaic Law. This link starts with the fact that the sacrificial practice under the Mosaic system was in place to atone for the sins of the people. Sin, in turn, was primarily associated with the transgression of the Mosaic written code. In this regard, in Hebrews 10:3, the author points out that sacrifices were a reminder of sin every year. According to 10:8, offerings were made for sin according to the Law. However, ultimately Jesus ended the sacrificial practice by offering himself once and for all (7:27). The Son is appointed by the word of oath that came 'later than the law' (μετὰ τὸν νόμον), and thus, superseded the Mosaic system. The fact that Christ as the high priest sanctified believers through his offering (10:10) and perfected forever those being sanctified (10:14) also exemplifies the link between the sacrificial system and the moral law. In other words, it is not merely the high priest that has changed; the function of the high priest has changed from sacrificing to God on behalf of the people's moral transgressions to cleansing the people themselves by perfecting and sanctifying them. As O'Brien (2010:356) points out, 'this perfection was not possible through the Levitical priesthood'.

In contrast with the sacrificial system under the Mosaic system, God's people now offer a sacrifice of praise (13:15), which is regarded as a 'fruit' of the new life under Christ's high priesthood. This idea is similar to the fruit of the Spirit to which Paul refers in Galatians 5:22, in that it flows forth from God's work in and through believers (Heb 13:21). Similarly, good deeds are regarded as sacrifices in themselves (13:16), which spring forth from the new covenant and from God making believers complete in every good work (13:21). In other words, in the new covenant, the idea of a sacrifice is transferred from the cultic domain to the moral domain (cf. Attridge 1989:401). Rather than being a function of the high priest, sacrifices are now part of the Christian living. One could thus say that the author's statement that God himself makes believers 'complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working amongst us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ' (13:21, NRSV), stands in implicit contrast with the idea to adhere to the precepts of the Mosaic Law.

Under the old covenant, the high priest 'can never take away sins' (οὐδέποτε δύναται περιελεῖν ἁμαρτίας, 10:11), which in itself establishes the close relationship between the cultic and the moral law. However, probably more importantly, nowhere in the New Testament is there any fundamental distinction(s) drawn between different kinds of (Mosaic) laws, such as the moral, cultic and/or purity laws. References to the Mosaic Law normally include all of these aspects. In this regard, the reference in 9:19 to the sacrifices that Moses offered to God after he had spoken 'every commandment' (πάσης ἐντολῆς) to the people, refers to Moses' offering after receiving the *whole Law, including the moral law* (Ex 20:1–24:8).

The last notable aspect of the way in which the new covenant is pictured different from the old is the concept of salvation, which is specifically associated with the new covenant and not with the old one. The salvation (σωτηρία) the Lord spoke, which is described as 'so great' (τηλικοῦτος) in Hebrews 2:3, 'is more than a "word" that requires obedience and pronounces judgement. It is a provision for obedience that delivers from judgement and brings the faithful into fellowship with God' (Cockerill 2012:109). Salvation is ultimately an eschatological concept (Attridge 1989:66; Lane 1991a:39, 189) that stems from a different source of revelation than that of Moses (1:1–2, see above) and transcends the existence under the Mosaic Law. In the new covenant, Christ himself is not only the 'captain' (ἀρχηγός) of people's salvation (2:10) but also became the *author* of 'eternal' (αἰώνιος) salvation for those who obey him (5:9). The writer of Hebrews uses the adjective αἰώνιος also as a qualifier for other related concepts, such as 'eternal redemption' (αἰωνίαν λύτρωσιν, 9:12) and 'eternal inheritance' (αἰωνίου κληρονομίας, 9:15). These were made possible by Christ's offering through the 'eternal Spirit' (πνεύματος αἰωνίου, 9:14), all of which form part of the new 'eternal covenant' (διαθήκης αἰωνίου, 13:20). The qualifier αἰώνιος thus binds all these new-covenant concepts together, which signifies that the new covenant entails much more than merely a new high priest. In fact, it signifies a whole new way of relating to God, which transcends the situation under the Mosaic system in every respect.

Apart from the way in which the qualifier αἰώνιος binds the above-mentioned concepts together, a pertinent link between salvation and the new covenant is established in 7:22–25, in which Jesus is portrayed as providing 'surety' (ἔγγυος) for a better covenant based on an unchangeable priesthood that lasts forever (vv. 22–24). Based on this priesthood, the author in verse 25 concludes as follows: 'therefore, he is also able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him' (ὅθεν καὶ σῶζειν εἰς τὸ παντελὲς δύναται τοὺς προσερχομένους δι' αὐτοῦ τῷ θεῷ). Jesus' high priesthood is thus the basis for this great salvation, which is akin to the new covenant. The ultimate eschatological reality of salvation is made explicit by 9:28 (e.g. Lane 1991a:189, 1991b:250–251), in which the author looks forward to Christ's second appearance, which will be 'apart from sin' (χωρὶς ἁμαρτίας) and 'for salvation' (εἰς σωτηρίαν). The concept of salvation, which is linked to Jesus' high priesthood and forms part of the new covenant, thus stands in implicit contrast with the situation under the old covenant.

## Sabbath and food

In Hebrews 3–4, the author mostly uses the word *κατάπαυσις* (3:11, 18; 4:1, 3, 5, 10, 11) for addressing the true rest, which believers must enter. Yet, in 4:9, the word *σαββατισμός* is used, which has to do with Sabbath observances and could point to the seventh day as a day of rest or the Sabbath celebration day (Koester 2008:272; cf. BDAG, s.v. *σαββατισμός*). According to Attridge (1989:131), the term 'is not simply a

synonym for rest, but designates more comprehensively sabbath observance'. Similarly, Lane (1991a:101) argues that σαββατισμός 'appears to have been coined from the cognate verb σαββατίζειν, "to observe/to celebrate the Sabbath"'. However, the author does not connect this true 'Sabbath rest' to 'the seventh day' (ἐβδόμη, 4:4) or even a 'certain day' (τινὰ... ἡμέραν, 4:7), but to 'today' (σήμερον, 4:7) when people should not harden their hearts and already enter into God's ultimate, eschatological (e.g. Attridge 1989:129, 131; O'Brien 2010:169) rest. This rest supersedes the rest provided by entering the land (4:8; Attridge 1989:123, 127, 130; Koester 2008:278) and even the Sabbath day(s) (cf. Guthrie 1998:162; Kistemaker 1984:112; Koester 2008:279). Whilst the general idea of the author might well be that this ultimate rest should be a festive Sabbath-like celebration (see esp. Lane 1991a:91–102), by picturing the true Sabbath rest as not being connected to a certain day (of the week), but to any day (today) when a believer enters the true rest, the idea that the congregants should continue the external observance the seventh day seems to run contrary to the way in which the author redefines the whole concept of Sabbath.

In Hebrews 9:10, the author renders food laws (Lv 11; Dt 14), laws that accompany sacrifices (Nm 6:15, 17; 28:7–8) and various rites of bodily cleansing (Ex 29:4; Lv 8:6; 16:14; see O'Brien 2010:315; cf. Bruce 1990:210; Hughes 1977:324) as 'fleshly ordinances' (δικαιώματα σαρκός, 9:10). Here, there is a clear contrast between the 'inward and spiritual and the outward and physical' (Guthrie 1983:186; cf. Johnson 2006:226). This clearly shows that according to the author, the first covenant was abrogated and replaced by the new covenant in Christ (7:22; 8:6, 13), being only symbolic of the 'present time' (9:9; Koester 2008:400; cf. Bruce 1990:211; Cockerill 2012:271). In other words, these outward regulations, 'which were imposed at Sinai ... have lost their validity under the new covenant' (Lane 1991b:225).<sup>3</sup> The idea that the congregants ought to remain fully Torah observant, including the observance of food laws, thus seems to be incompatible with the thrust of the author's argument about these external observances.

## Reading Hebrews 7 in the context of the whole letter

When reassessing Hebrews 7 in light of the way in which law and covenant are pictured in the whole letter, one is, indeed, hard pressed to confine the author's discourse on law to the specific law(s) about priesthood, as some argue (Regev 2017; Schmitt 2009; Thiessen 2019). It is, indeed, that the author's references to νόμος focus on the Mosaic regulations about priesthood and sacrifices in certain instances (esp. 7:5, 16, 28; 8:4; 9: 22; 10:8), but as discussed, the reference to νόμος in 8:10 and 10:16 involves moral laws, and in 9:19, it pertains to the whole law that was given at Sinai (Ex 20–24). Although the reference to νόμος in 10:1 also pertains to sacrificial laws,

<sup>3</sup>Johnson (2006:227) argues that the author's polemic against foods, drinks and washings shows that the sacrificial cult was still operative in the temple at the time of writing. This is not easily verified, however.

this reference to the law is quite general, as is the reference to those who reject Moses Law in 10:28. There are thus clear instances in the letter where references to law cannot be confined to priestly or sacrificial laws.

To come back to the references to νόμος in 7:12 and 19, although the focus of chapter 7 is certainly on laws pertaining to priesthood, it is not so much that the author confines references to νόμος to laws on priesthood or sacrifice; it is rather that the author 'viewed the sacrificial cultus as the essence of the Mosaic law' (O'Brien 2010:259, emphasis added). The changing of the sacrificial laws thus forms part of a broader discourse on the *changing of the whole law* (cf. Bruce 1990:167; Gordon 2008:103; Haber 2005:105–106<sup>4</sup>; Hughes 1977:256; Lane 1991a:182; Thompson 2008:156, 2011:548, 557–558; Tönges 2005:94). It is noteworthy in this regard that the author does not draw any pertinent distinctions between parts of the law, which is also the case in the rest of the New Testament. There is thus no compelling reason that unqualified references to νόμος in Hebrews should only involve sacrificial or priestly laws and exclude the rest of the law, even though the focus might be on the cultic dimension of the law at certain points in the discourse (e.g. 7:12, 19; 10:1).

## Hebrews 10:28

The last issue to be addressed is the author's reference in Hebrews 10:28 to a person who rejected 'Moses' Law' (νόμον Μωϋσέως) to be put to death (Dt 17:2–7). As noted earlier, some argued that this verse is evidence of the continued validity of the Mosaic Law (Regev 2017; Thiessen 2019). But if the author intended such a notion, then he would probably not qualify the law as Moses' Law, but anticipate by default that the readers would understand that the Mosaic Law is in view. The qualification Μωϋσέως rather points to the situation under the old covenant. In other words, the question asked in 10:29 means that if people underwent such severe punishment in the old covenant, apostasy in the new covenant would be much more serious (Guthrie 1983:221–222, 1998:356–357; Lane 1991b:293–294; O'Brien 2010:376–377; cf. Bruce 1990: 261–263<sup>5</sup>; Ellingworth 1993:536–537; Hughes 1977:421–423; Kistemaker 1984:294–295).

## Conclusion

In reference to the concept of 'law' in the Letter to the Hebrews, there are instances where the author focuses on sacrificial and priestly laws, especially in chapter 7. However, if the discourse on law in the whole letter is considered, references to 'law' that focus on sacrificial or priestly laws (esp. 7:5, 16, 28; 8:4; 9: 22; 10:8) have to be interpreted against the bigger picture of the abrogation of the old covenant, which includes the whole Mosaic legal system. As there are clear references to 'law' that

<sup>4</sup>Haber argued that according to Hebrews there is no new law and that the law belongs to the old order.

<sup>5</sup>Kistemaker and Burce argued that the author draws an implicit comparison between the severity of physical death under the old covenant and spiritual death under the new.

stretches beyond the cultic realm (e.g. 8:10, 19:19 and 10:16), one is hard pressed to *confine* references to 'law' to the cultic domain throughout the letter. In the letter, the moral, the cultic and the covenantal aspects of law are inseparably linked, and there are no pertinent distinctions drawn between these aspects of law. However more importantly, there are pertinent contrasts in the letter that pertain to a *fundamental contrast between two covenantal systems from two salvation-historical eras*: the old covenant under the Mosaic system and the new covenant under Jesus' high priesthood. All of the following contrasts are related to this fundamental contrast: the contrast between the old and new covenants (7:22–24; 8:6, 8, 10, 3; 9:15; 10:16; 12:24; 13:20), between the different sources of revelation (1:1–2; 2:2), between Moses and Jesus (3:3–4, 16), between the ways in which priesthood and sacrifices function in relation to sin (7:27; 8:3; 9:7, 11, 25; 10:10–11; 9:14; 13:11, 15–16), between the outward or physical and the inward or spiritual (7:16; 9:10–11) and between the earthly and heavenly domains (9:22–23; 11:16; 12:20–25) of the respective covenantal systems. In contrast with the covenant under the Mosaic system, in the new covenant, the believer partakes in salvation (2:3, 10; 5:9; 7:25; 9:28) and stands in a new relationship with God, which includes morality (8:10; 10:7, 9, 16, 36; 13:21), sanctification (2:11; 10:14; 13:12) and the basis from which good works flow (10:24; 13:15–16, 21). In addition, the author writes in a way about Sabbath observance (4:4, 7, 9) and food laws (9:10) that is inconsistent with the notion that these observances should still be upheld in terms of external performance. The idea that the author of Hebrews only envisions a change of priestly or sacrificial law, and that the rest of the Torah still remains if full effect for followers of Jesus can thus not be upheld. On another level, one can conclude that although Paul in his discourse against the Mosaic Law focuses more on the moral aspect of law and the writer of Hebrews focuses more on the cultic aspect of law, both the authors ultimately envision the fulfilment and replacement of the whole Mosaic system in Christ (cf. Bruce 1990:166–167).

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