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Restructuring Views on Law in Hebrews 7:12

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μετατιθεμένης γὰρ τῆς ἱερωσύνης ἐξ ἀνάγκης καὶ νόμου μετάθεσις γίνεται.

For when the priesthood changes of necessity also there is a change of law. (Heb 7:12)

Taking into consideration the importance of the Scriptures for the author of Hebrews, the statement in 7:12 attesting to a necessary change of law comes as a surprise, because it seems to contradict the otherwise positive appeals the author makes to Torah.1 Furthermore, 7:12 is stylistically different from the verses around it. For these and other reasons, most commentators have tended to avoid this verse. Those who dare to tackle it usually compare it to the bold statement about the “abrogation”2 of the commandment—and, by implication, of the law—in 7:18–19. Whereas most commentators assume that, in Hebrews, νόμος is equivalent to Torah, I argue that νόμος in 7:12 refers only to cultic laws pertaining to priesthood.3 In support of this thesis, I also propose an alternative to the current schol-

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1 The author relies heavily on narratives and motifs found in Torah, for example, the wilderness wanderings and the prominence of Moses in Hebrews 3–4, the meeting of Abram and Melchizedek in ch. 7, and many of the people of faith in ch. 11. Furthermore, in 10:28 the author warns against setting aside νόμον Μωυσῆς, a verse that will be discussed below.

2 I put “abrogate” and “abrogation” in quotation marks because I do not think that these are good translations for words derived from ἀθέτεω. I prefer to translate ἀθέτησις as “set aside.”

3 In addition, the findings of this article have significant implications for how one reads νόμος in Heb 7:19.
arly consensus concerning the structure of ch. 7. While the overwhelming majority of commentators divide this pericope between v. 19 and v. 20, the three parallel μὲν . . . δέ constructions of vv. 18–25 demand that these verses be read as a unit. Delimiting the author’s argument in this way frees νόμος in 7:12 to be read in the context of vv. 11–17 as law pertaining to priesthood.

I. ON THE ONE HAND (μὲν) . . . ON THE OTHER HAND (δέ)

One reason why many commentators fail to recognize that νόμος in 7:12 refers only to priestly laws is that they do not properly delimit the contours of the author’s argument in ch. 7. The overwhelming majority of commentators make the error of combining vv. 18–19 with vv. 11–17.4 As a result, most read 7:12 as a portent of the author’s ultimate nullification of the law in vv. 18–19. But commentators divide the pericope after v. 19 on insufficient grounds: first, the author’s repeated use of γάρ (which occurs seven times between v. 11 and v. 19); and, second, a supposed inclusio based on the word group τελείωσις and the word group νόμος in vv. 11 and 19.5 While vv. 11–19 do indeed contain an impressive aggregation of γάρ(s), the author does not use γάρ to denote the limits of a distinct argument located between these verses. Quite the opposite, both in v. 11 and in v. 19, the author uses γάρ to introduce a parenthetical phrase that expounds on the preced-

4 There are three common ways to divide ch. 7, though the final result is the same. First, there are those who divide the chapter into three major paragraphs: vv. 1–10, 11–19, 20–28. See, e.g., David R. Anderson, The King-Priest of Psalm 110 in Hebrews (Studies in Biblical Literature 21; New York: P. Lang, 2001); Paul Ellingworth, The Epistle to the Hebrews (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Harald Hegermann, Der Brief an die Hebräer (THKNT 16; Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1988); Luke Timothy Johnson, Hebrews (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); Alan C. Mitchell, Hebrews (SP; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007); James A. Moffatt, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (ICC; Edinburgh: Clark, 1924); Gerd Schunack, Der Hebraerbrief (ZBK 14; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 2002). Second, some divide the passage into two sections, vv. 1–10 and 11–28. However, all of them further subdivide the latter section into vv. 11–19 and 20–28. See, e.g., Harold W. Attridge, The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989); Craig R. Koester, Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB 36, new ed; New York: Doubleday, 2001); William L. Lane, Hebrews 1–8 (WBC 47A; Dallas: Word Books, 1991); David A. DeSilva, Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000). Third, there are those who believe that 7:1-25 may have at one point been an independent midrash. See, e.g., James Kurianal, Jesus Our High Priest: Ps 110,4 as the Substructure of Heb 5,1–7,28 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000). Nevertheless, Kurianal also subdivides ch. 7 into vv. 1–10, 11–19, and 20–25.

5 The supposed inclusio consists of the words τελείωσις (v. 11) and ἐτελείωσεν (v. 19), along with the words νενομοθέτησα (v. 11) and νόμος (v. 19).
ing clause. Moreover, when one recognizes that v. 19a is a parenthetical remark and not the culmination of the author’s comments on the law, then the putative inclusio begins to break down as well. By repeating key words in v. 19, the author reminds the hearers of his previous argument in v. 11 concerning the law, an argument that will be discussed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>vv. 18–19</th>
<th>Μέν</th>
<th>Δέ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>οὐδὲν ἐς μὲν γὰρ γίνεται προσαγώγη τοῦ αὐτῆς ἁπάντως καὶ ἀνωφελές.</td>
<td>οὐκ ἐπεισαγωγὴ δὲ κρείττονος ἐπεισαγωγὴ δὲ ἔγγραφον τῷ θεῷ.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is, on the one hand, the abrogation of an earlier commandment because it was weak and ineffectual.</td>
<td>. . . there is, on the other hand, the introduction of a better hope, through which we approach God.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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| vv. 20–21 | οἱ μὲν γὰρ χωρὶς ὁρκῳσίας εἰσίν ἱερεῖς γεγονότες, | οὸ δὲ μετὰ ὁρκῳσίας διὰ τοῦ λέγοντος πρὸς αὐτῶν ὁμοὺς κυρίου καὶ οὐ μεταμεληθῆσαι σὺ ἱερεὺς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα. |
| . . . for others who became priests took their office without an oath, | but this one became a priest with an oath, because of the one who said to him, “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever’” |

| vv. 23–24 | Καὶ οἱ μὲν πλείονες εἰσίν γεγονότες ἱερεῖς διὰ τὸ θανάτῳ κυρίου κυρίου οὐ χωλύσασι παραμένειν; | οὸ δὲ διὰ τὸ μενεῖν αὐτῶν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ἀπαράβατον ἔχει τὴν ἱερωσύνην |
| Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; | but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. |

In contrast to the structural divisions proposed by most commentators, I conclude, based on the syntax of ch. 7, that vv. 18–19 should be read with vv. 20–25. The author’s comments about ἐντολή/νόμος in vv. 18–19 form the first of three

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6 Although it is not pertinent to argue here, I assume that the anonymous author of Hebrews was male and that the genre of Hebrews is a sermon.
parallel contrasts between the “former” and the “better”\(^7\) in vv. 18–25, each contrast set off by the correlative conjunctions \(μὲν\) . . . \(δέ\) (on the one hand . . . on the other hand). This striking parallelism in form is strengthened by the author’s use of comparative words in each \(μὲν\) . . . \(δέ\) pair: a better hope (\(κρείττονος \ ἐλπίδος\)) (v. 19), a better covenant (\(κρείττονος \ διαθήκης\)) (v. 22), and “more priests” under the former commandment (\(πλείων\), the comparative of \(πολύς\) [v. 23]), as opposed to the single eternal priest of the new covenant (v. 24). Thus, both structurally and linguistically, vv. 18 and 19 should be read with what follows and not as the author’s pronouncement of the ultimate demise of all Jewish law.\(^8\)

Most commentators assume that in Hebrews \(νόμος\) always means Torah, or the first five books in either the Hebrew Bible or the Septuagint.\(^9\) However, when vv. 11–17 are read apart from vv. 18–19, the author seems concerned only with a very specific set of laws: requirements for priesthood.\(^10\)

\(^{7}\) These descriptive words are not used in every claim. I am using them merely to categorize the contrasts into two large groups.

\(^{8}\) One author, August Strobel, does divide ch. 7 after v. 17 according to the three parallel claims that I have outlined here: “Die Auslegung neigt allgemein dazu, die V.18–25 als eigene gedankliche Einheit abzugrenzen, finden sich doch darin drei gleichartige Sätze nach dem Schema: ‘zwar–aber.’” See August Strobel, Der Brief an die Hebräer (NTD 9/2; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 156. Nevertheless, Strobel’s careful attention to the structure of ch. 7 has largely remained unnoticed by interpreters. One possible explanation for why few commentators have been persuaded by Strobel’s division of ch. 7 is that he ultimately fails to recognize the implication of this threefold parallelism for the correct interpretation of the author’s use of \(νόμος\). Strobel insists that the author of Hebrews abrogates “das Gesetz des Mose.” He compares what he views as the author’s disparaging use of \(νόμος\) to Paul’s statement that \(νόμος\) leads to death (Rom 7:9–12). Strobel writes, “Der Hebr. hält sein Unvermögen fest, zu ‚vollenden’. Die Beurteilung stellt sich weniger radikal dar [than Paul’s view], läuft aber im Endeffekt auf das gleiche Resultat hinaus. Wer sich auf das ‚Gesetz’ verlässt, hat keine ‚Hoffnung.” In contrast, I argue that the threefold structure of Heb 7:18–25 highlights the author’s very particular use of \(νόμος\) in ch. 7 to refer only to laws pertaining to priesthood.

\(^{9}\) The majority of commentators render \(νόμος\) as “Law.” However, all of these interpreters speak about the Law in connection with the Torah and also use a lower-case “law” when referring to any other kind of law. See, e.g., Attridge, Epistle, 200; Ellingworth, Epistle, 374; and Koester, Hebrews, 354. The distinction of upper- and lower-case letters for “law” occurs also in some translations, for example, the NIV and the NASB.

\(^{10}\) The use of the singular \(οợ νόμος\) to refer to a group of laws (and not to the Torah as a whole) is not uncommon in the LXX. In doing so, the LXX translators maintain the singular form of \(ἡγίστη\) to refer to plural \(ἡγίστη\), which Jacob Milgrom suggests might be a stylistic preference in the P literature. See Jacob Milgrom, Leviticus: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, vol. 1, Leviticus 1–16 (AB 3; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 383. One particularly interesting example occurs in Lev 7:37 (LXX): \(ο ylabel\ νόμος\ τῶν ὀλοκλαυμάτων καὶ θυσίας καὶ περὶ ἀμαρτίας καὶ τῆς πλημμελείας καὶ τῆς τελειώσεως καὶ τῆς θυσίας τοῦ σωτήρου. This is the ritual of the burnt offering, the grain offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering, the offering of ordination, and the sacrifice of well-being.” Here we find a summary of
ical commandment” (νόμον ἐντολῆς σαρκίνης [7:16]) pronounced by Moses, a priest must belong to the tribe of Levi. The author of Hebrews claims, however, that a different priest has arisen—one who has not become a priest κατὰ νόμον (“according to the law”) but κατὰ δύναμιν ζωῆς ἀκαταλύτου (“according to the power of an indestructible life” [7:16]). Of course, this raises the question, To what does the author of Hebrews refer when he uses the word νόμος? Therefore, in the next section, I will turn to a close reading of the verses in ch. 7 that contain the word νόμος or related words such as νομοθετέω and ἐντολή.

I. Νόμος in Hebrews 7

The first occurrence of νόμος in ch. 7, which is also the first occurrence in Hebrews, is in the context of a commandment (ἐντολή) concerning the Levitical priesthood: “And on the one hand, the ones of the sons of Levi receiving the commandment (ἐντολή)—the priests—have to exact a tithe from the people according to the law (κατὰ τὸν νόμον) . . . ” (7:5). Already in this first instance, νόμος is linked in some way to the regulations concerning the priestly office. Yet the more difficult question is that of the relationship between νόμος and ἐντολή. William Lane has argued that in 7:5 the commandment (ἐντολή) to tithe is one part of the Law (νόμος), which he understands to be “the sum of the commandments” given by Moses. While I agree with Lane that in this verse νόμος does seem to encom-
pass more than ἑντολή, this verse alone does not lead one to conclude that the author of Hebrews equates νόμος with Mosaic Law. On the contrary, νόμος in this verse is closely related to commandments concerning cultus.

Furthermore, the next time νόμος and ἑντολή appear together (Heb 7:16), they refer to the same entity—namely, the physical requirement for becoming a priest. Verse 16 describes the one who arises in the order of Melchizedek as another priest ὃς οὐ κατὰ νόμον ἑντολῆς σαρκίνης γέγονεν ἀλλὰ κατὰ δύναμιν ζωῆς ἀκαταλύτου, “one who has become a priest, not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life.” In this verse, which already has been noted because of its emphasis on the requirements for priestly service, Lane’s suggestion that the commandment is a part of the “Law” does not work. At first glance, one might surmise the exact opposite, that law in v. 16 is a possession of an overarching physical commandment: κατὰ νόμον ἑντολῆς σαρκίνης. However, if the genitive ἑντολῆς is understood as a genitive of apposition, then νόμος and ἑντολή must refer to the same entity.15 Νόμος here must mean something like “rule” or “requirement.” Since in this verse the commandment is the physical requirement for priesthood in the order of Aaron, the “law” must also refer to the specific, physical requirement concerning priestly lineage.

Before turning to the next instance in which the author uses νόμος and ἑντολή (vv. 18–19), we must go back and analyze the use of the related verb νομοθετέω in v. 11.16 Verses 11 and 19 are connected by the theme of the inability to bring about perfection. The detection of a common theme in these two verses leads many commentators to surmise an inclusio.17 Although not an inclusio, v. 11 qualifies the progression of the author’s argument in v. 19. When viewed in isolation, v. 19 might suggest that the Law (Torah) was unable to bring about perfection. Verse 11, however, qualifies this by stating that the problem stemmed from laws

15 Kurianal, Jesus Our High Priest, 119. The other option—to understand ἑντολή as a possessive genitive—requires one to understand νόμος as a principle derived from natural law. However, the author of Hebrews appeals not to natural but to revealed law throughout the sermon.

16 The verb νομοθετέω appears one other time in the NT, in Heb 8:6, a verse that raises questions about the relationship between covenant and promises.

17 See the works cited in n. 4 above. See also Albert Vanhoye, La structure littéraire de L’Épître aux Hébreux (StudNeot, Studia 1; 2nd ed.; Paris: Desclée, 1976), 130–32. Vanhoye structures all of ch. 7 by inclusions based on key-word repetition; however, he fails to take into account the three parallel μὲν... δέ constructions in 7:18–25 and, thus, falsely assumes that v. 19 completes (instead of carries forward) the argument begun in v. 11.
concerning an imperfect priesthood. This argument is based upon two interpretive decisions in v. 11—the first, concerning αὐτῆς, and the second, concerning ἐπί.

With the identification of ἱερωσύνη as the proper antecedent of αὐτῆς in v. 11, the concepts of law and priesthood are clearly brought together for the first time:

Εἰ μὲν οὖν τελείωσις διὰ τῆς Λευιτικῆς ἱερωσύνης ἦν, ὁ λαὸς γὰρ ἐπ’ αὐτῆς νενομοθέτηται, τίς ἔτι χρεία κατὰ τὴν τάξιν Μελχισέδεκ ἕτερον ἁνιστασθαι ἱερέα καὶ οὐ κατὰ τὴν τάξιν Λαρὼν λέγεσθαι;

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood—for the people received the law under this priesthood—what further need would there been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron?

Verse 11 contains two feminine nouns prior to the ambiguous pronoun αὐτῆς—either of which could be a possible antecedent for the pronoun. The first possible antecedent of αὐτῆς is τελείωσις. However, according to v. 19 the law perfected nothing (οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐτελείωσεν ὁ νόμος). If the law did not make anything perfect, then it is highly unlikely that the people18 received the law ἐπί perfection.19 Therefore, τελείωσις cannot be the antecedent of αὐτῆς. The only other feminine singular noun in v. 11 that could be a possible antecedent of αὐτῆς is ἱερωσύνη. Substituting the antecedent ἱερωσύνη for αὐτῆς, the sentence now reads that the law was given to the people ἐπί the Levitical priesthood. Thus, the author establishes a direct relationship between priesthood and law in v. 11. Yet, before the extent of the relationship between priesthood and law can be determined it will be necessary to answer a second exegetical question, the meaning of ἐπί with the genitive αὐτῆς.

Any decision about the translation of the preposition ἐπί must consider v. 28, in which the law constitutes priests (ὁ νόμος γὰρ ἀνθρώπους καθίστασις ἁρχιερεῖς ἔχοντας ἀσθένειαν . . . , “For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness . . .”). Just as v. 11 and v. 19 are thematically connected, vv. 11 and 28 share a theme of the relationship between law and priesthood. In v. 28, the relationship between νόμος and priesthood is not that the law is given on

18 That the people receive laws concerning the Levitical priesthood in v. 11 stands in striking contrast to the exhortation to draw near to God through Jesus’ eternal priesthood (see 4:16; 10:22; 7:25). The exhortation to draw near to God, which delimits the central section of the sermon, is repeated in 7:25 at the climax of the author’s argument concerning priesthood. One effect of the “change of law” in 7:12 is that all people—not only priests—can draw near to God through Christ.

19 For the moment, I am not translating the preposition ἐπί, in order to focus on a translation of the genitive αὐτῆς. For possible translations of ἐπί, see the following paragraph.
the basis of priesthood but that νόμος appoints high priests. Nevertheless, the dominant interpretation of ἐπί in v. 11 contradicts v. 28. According to Lane, the preposition ἐπί has typically been understood in three ways, with the first being preferred: (1) the law was given on the basis of the Levitical priesthood (NEB, JB, TEV, and NIV); (2) the law was given under (or through) the Levitical priesthood; or (3) the law was given in association with the Levitical priesthood. Yet none of these options fits with v. 28. Therefore, Lane proposes a fourth reading: in the case of (or, concerning). He translates v. 11a: “If, then, perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for the people received regulations concerning the Levitical priesthood). . . .” Lane’s translation of v. 11a concurs with the logic of v. 28. In both verses, “law” refers to ordinances concerning priestly order. In support of his argument, Lane also notes examples from Philo of νομοθετέω with ἐπί and the genitive or dative that should be translated “regulations laid down by the law in the case of (or, concerning).” Moreover, Lane’s reading of v. 11a also fits well into the larger context of vv. 11–17 in which references are being made to ordinances concerning priesthood (i.e., tribe, lineage, etc.).

Having looked at the meaning of νόμος (and related words) in the rest of ch. 7, it is now possible to return to vv. 18–19. In these verses, one can now discern that it is not the Law that is “abrogated” but the ἐντολή. The author claims that the preceding commandment is set aside (ἀθέτησις) because it was weak and useless. As we have observed in the two prior verses in which ἐντολή is paired with νόμος (7:5, 16), ἐντολή does not refer to something more encompassing than νόμος. Thus, whatever is being set aside in v. 18 must be commensurate with or less than νόμος in v. 19. This distinction between the commandment that is set aside and the Law is important when one later turns to the author’s comments in 10:28.

20 In v. 28, one could argue that νόμος refers to a comprehensive entity, akin to Torah. However, the author only makes the claim that νόμος appoints high priests. In this verse, νόμος is again closely connected to cultic regulations concerning priesthood. See n. 25 below.

21 Ellingworth (Epistle, 372) attempts to avoid the difficulties that arise between v. 11 and v. 28 when ἐπί is translated as “on the basis of” the Levitical priesthood. He writes, “in order to take ιερωσύνης as the antecedent of ἐπ’ αὐτῆς, it is not necessary . . . to see a contradiction with 7:28 . . . Priesthood and law are indissolubly bound together; and within this relation, priesthood is logically prior (cf. v.12; 8:6). The present clause therefore means ‘the levitical priesthood . . . was the basis of the Law given to the people.’” But how can the reception of the law be based on the same entity that the law appoints—priesthood? Ellingworth’s reasoning is circular.

22 Lane, Hebrews 1–8, 174. The examples Lane cites are Philo, Spec. leg. 2.35, “These are regulations laid down by law concerning people [ἐπί ἀνθρώπους]; but concerning animals [ἐπὶ δὲ κτήνων] we have the following regulations [νομοθετέται];” and ibid., 1.235, “regulations concerning sins of ignorance have been laid down [νομοθετήσας ἐπὶ τοῖς ἀκουσίοις].” See also Harm W. Hollander, “Hebrews 7.11 and 8.6: A Suggestion for the Translation of nenomothetetαι epi” BT 30 (1979): 247.
Anyone who set aside [ἀθετήσας] the Law of Moses [νόμον Μωϋσέως] dies without mercy based on two or three testimonies.  

Given that the author here seems to condone the severe punishment prescribed for anyone who set aside (ἀθετήσας) the Law of Moses, the diligent exegete must give careful attention to the nature of the preceding commandment that the author sets aside (ἀθέτησις) in 7:18.

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 concerning the lineage of priests in order to bring in a better hope. This interpretation of vv. 18–19, in contrast to the dominant interpretation, concludes that the author of Hebrews does not set aside the Mosaic Law but only the commandments pertaining to Levitical priesthood.

Yet why, then, does the author add in 7:19 that “the law perfected nothing”? Because of the thematic link already established between v. 11 and v. 19, any interpretation of νόμος in v. 19 must cohere with v. 11. In v. 11, the failure to attain perfection is closely connected to the Levitical priesthood, concerning which the

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23 Here the NRSV (wrongly) translates ἀθετήσας as “violated.”

24 I do believe that here νόμον Μωϋσέως refers to the Torah (a claim that I am not willing to make in ch. 7). The justification for making this connection is the association of νόμος with Moses. In later writings, the Pentateuch as a whole was most often referred to by the titles “Law of the Lord” or “Law of Moses.” Thus, in 10.28, the author refers to the Torah with the extended title “Law of Moses” (νόμον Μωϋσέως). See Walter Gubro, “νόμος,” TDNT 4:1046.

25 One possible answer might lie in applying Lane’s suggestion from v. 5—that the ἐντολή is part of a greater entity, ὁ νόμος. Thus, the definite article would denote the author’s distinction between laws pertaining to priesthood and the Torah of Moses. However, ὁ νόμος also occurs in v. 28 with the specific designation that ὁ νόμος appoints high priests. In v. 28, ὁ νόμος refers to priestly ordinances. Furthermore, as has already been addressed, this reading of νόμος as a greater entity comprising multiple commandments (ἐντολή) does not make sense in v. 16, which is closely connected to vv. 18–19.

An interesting connection between Hebrews 7 and νόμος in the LXX that needs to be explored further is the use of ὁ νόμος to introduce a summary of specific laws/ordinances in Lev 7:37–38. Here we find a summary of the “laws,” or commandments, concerning sacrifices in Leviticus 5–6 and the “law of priestly ordination/perfection”—ὁ νόμος... τῆς τελειώσεως—found in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 7. This law describes the ordination offering that Moses received concerning Aaron and his sons. Milgrom argues, however, that this law was executed only once, and subsequently only high priests were inducted by this rite (Exod 29:29–30) (Leviticus, 1:436). This fits extremely well with Heb 7:28, in which “the Law appoints high priests”—in particular ὁ νόμος... τῆς τελειώσεως, or the ordination law.
people received laws (see above). Again, in v. 28, the law appoints high priests who are weak. In contrast, the author of Hebrews believes Jesus’ priesthood to be different from the Levitical priesthood in that he has been made perfect forever (7:28). Similarly, in vv. 18–19, the author draws a contrast between the weak and ineffective commandment and the bringing in of a better hope. The parenthetical phrase in v. 19 οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐτελείωσεν ὁ νόμος ("the law perfected nothing") provides the author’s justification for v. 18. He can set aside the former commandment because the requirement that the people received concerning the Levitical priesthood ultimately did not enable that priesthood to bring about perfection. According to this reading, νόμος is commensurate with ἐντολή in vv. 18–19. Both refer to the commandments pertaining to the Levitical priesthood. The failure of the Levitical priesthood to attain perfection is the reason the author can “set aside” the previous commandment concerning that priesthood and instead look toward a different priest—a better hope, Jesus.  

Before turning to 7:12, let us review the argument thus far. First, every occurrence of νόμος (or related words) in ch. 7 appears in the context of cultic concerns. Second, in vv. 11, 16, 19, and 28, νόμος refers specifically to laws concerning Levitical priesthood. Third, in the analysis of vv. 18–19, the immediate context of the author’s statement points to the setting aside of only the commandments concerning the lineage of priests. Accordingly, a close reading of the verses in ch. 7 that contain the word νόμος (or related words) points overwhelmingly toward a very specific use of the word νόμος by the author of Hebrews. The νόμος of ch. 7 refers only to the laws pertaining to Levitical priesthood, or, even more specifically, to laws concerning who could become a Levitical priest.

II. Change of Law in Hebrews 7:12

Given the overwhelming evidence that elsewhere in ch. 7 the author of Hebrews uses νόμος to refer to cultic laws pertaining to priesthood, νόμος in 7:12 must also refer to priestly law. Most likely, the author of Hebrews uses νόμος in v. 12 in the same way he uses νόμος in the rest of ch. 7. As stated above, in the other occurrences in ch. 7, νόμος refers to cultic laws associated with priesthood. Therefore, with considerable certainty, it can be said that the change of νόμος in 7:12 refers only to cultic laws pertaining to priesthood.

26 Setting aside the commandment does not necessarily imply a supersessionist move. The laws concerning another priest who has arisen do not replace the laws pertaining to the Levitical priesthood. They are two distinct sets of laws pertaining to two different priesthoods.

27 Some may object that this is not significant because Hebrews is a cultic book; however, νόμος never appears outside of the author’s arguments about explicitly cultic matters—priesthood, sacrifices, altars, and so on (chs. 7–10).
Moreover, νόμος understood as cultic laws pertaining to priesthood is consistent with the author’s larger argument in vv. 11–17 concerning priestly requirements. When vv. 11–17 are read apart from the supposed *inclusio* with vv. 18–19, one sustained argument emerges. In vv. 11–17, the author attempts to explain how Christ, who came from the tribe of Judah, could be a priest. He concludes that Christ has arisen as a different priest, not on the basis of physical requirement—that is, belonging to the tribe of Levi—but according to the power of an indestructible life. So, in order to make sense, 7:12 (which falls in the middle of this sustained argument about requirements for priestly service) must refer to laws concerning priesthood. This reading avoids the conceptual leap made by those espousing the dominant interpretation of νόμος in Hebrews as Torah. Reading νόμος as Torah inevitably forces those scholars to say that it is not simply the former priesthood that poses a problem for the author of Hebrews. Rather, the whole “Law” viewed via such a reading is ultimately incongruous. Yet nowhere else does the author of Hebrews reject the whole Law; in fact, in 10:28 he warns against setting aside the Law of Moses. Thus, in contrast to the dominant interpretation of νόμος as Torah in 7:12, the author uses νόμος here in the very limited sense of priestly law, in keeping with the larger argument that he is making in vv. 11–17.

What’s more, this interpretation provides a clear, logical reading of the verse: “When the priesthood changes, the laws concerning priesthood also must change.” In v. 12, a change in priesthood results in a corresponding change of law. But what is the law that is changed? The dominant interpretation is that Torah changes. However, in v. 11, the people are given laws concerning the Levitical priesthood. Therefore, when a different priest arises, it is logical to assume that this change of priesthood, from the order of Aaron to the order of Melchizedek (v. 11), must be accompanied by a corresponding change of laws concerning priesthood. A change of priesthood does not presume a rejection of the “Law.” Rather, a change of priesthood most naturally results in a change of only those laws pertaining to priesthood.

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28 In 10:1, νόμος is modified by the phrase “having a shadow of the coming good things not itself the image of the things” (*Σκιὰν γὰρ ἔχων ὁ νόμος τῶν μελλόντων ἀγαθῶν, οὐκ αὐτὴν τὴν εἰκόνα τῶν πραγμάτων...*). But even here the shadow refers to the sacrifices offered continually, year after year (10:3), which are a shadow of Christ’s sacrifice once for all (10:12). Νόμος in 10:1, then, refers to the cultic regulations concerning yearly sacrifices.

29 Although I have chosen to translate the genitive absolute as a circumstantial clause (primarily because I believe that the author of Hebrews is basing his claim about a new priesthood on his prior belief that a different priest already has arisen), my argument still stands if the genitive absolute is translated as a condition clause: “If the priesthood changes, the laws concerning priesthood also must change.”
III. Conclusion

I have argued for the overturning of the scholarly consensus on two matters regarding the interpretation of Hebrews 7. First, in contrast to the dominant opinion that νόμος in 7:12 refers to Torah, I have argued that the author of Hebrews uses νόμος in this verse—as he does throughout ch. 7—to refer to a change only in cultic laws pertaining to priesthood. Second, I have argued, in contrast to the overwhelming majority of commentators, that the threefold μὲν . . . δὲ comparisons in ch. 7 structurally mandate that vv. 18–19 be read with vv. 20–25 and not as an inclusio with vv. 11–17. When vv. 11–17 are read apart from the supposed inclusio with vv. 18–19, the focus of the argument shifts away from a putative “abrogation” of Torah and toward a particular concern about requirements for priestly service. Reading vv. 11–17 as a distinct argument about the requirements for priesthood bolsters my argument that the author of Hebrews uses νόμος in 7:12 as a limited reference to a change only of cultic laws pertaining to priesthood.

While the focus of this article has been limited to the interpretation of νόμος in Hebrews 7, I conclude by gesturing toward some of the broad questions raised by the findings of this study. It is my hope that these questions will encourage further dialogue, particularly on issues surrounding the history of the interpretation of Hebrews. First, my work on the author’s use of νόμος in ch. 7 to refer only to cultic laws pertaining to priesthood raises questions about the author’s use of νόμος elsewhere. Does the author of Hebrews consistently hold a more general view of law than that of νόμος as Torah? To answer this question would require a careful look at how the author uses νόμος outside of ch. 7.

Second, the findings of this study raise important questions about the interpretation of Hebrews as a supersessionist text.30 Reading νόμος as laws pertaining to priesthood and not as Torah challenges one key aspect of a supersessionist interpretation of Hebrews: an “abrogation” of the Jewish Law/Torah (7:18–19). If the author of Hebrews does not deny the validity of Torah as a whole but proclaims only a change of the specific commandments related to priesthood, then what is the author’s stance toward other cultic aspects of Judaism? For example, the dominant interpretation for some time in Hebrews scholarship has been that the epistle contains an implicit supersessionist claim that the Levitical sacrifices and the Levitical priests have been replaced/superseded by Christ’s sacrifice of himself.31 However,

30 A classical definition of “supersessionism” maintains that the church “supersedes” Israel, and thus the church takes the place of Israel as the people of God.
31 For example, see Koester, Hebrews, 436ff.; Attridge, Epistle, 276; and Lane, Hebrews 1–8, 263, 267. In contrast to this position, see the more recent work of Luke Timothy Johnson (Hebrews, 252), who emphasizes throughout his commentary that Hebrews is not supersessionist and that Hebrews nowhere claims that “God’s covenant with Israel is nullified or replaced by another with Christians.”
this seems to contradict the author’s claim in 8:4 that if Christ were on earth he would not be a priest because there are already those who offer gifts according to the Law. If the author can assert a change of law pertaining to priesthood while at the same time affirming the continuing validity of the Torah, then it is impossible for the author to proclaim the efficacy of Christ’s one-time sacrifice while at the same time maintaining certain functions of the Levitical priesthood or the sacrifices associated with it? These are questions that have long been taken for granted by scholars of the epistle to the Hebrews. However, if the author of Hebrews uses νόμος to refer to “law” in a more general sense than Torah, then perhaps my conclusions highlight the need for a more nuanced, better interpretation of the author’s view of other aspects of Judaism as well.