

# The Epistle to the Hebrews

Lesson # 17

Hebrews 7:1-10

The Surprising but Essential Melchizedek

December 31, 2017

## Introduction

Heb. 7:1-3

“The confession that “God’s Son is our Priest” is possible only on the basis of Hebrews. Nowhere else in the NT is Jesus designated as a priest or high priest. There are, to be sure, aspects of Jesus’ ministry in the Gospels which might encourage us to think in the categories of priesthood. John 17, for example, has been described as “the high-priestly prayer of Jesus.” There Jesus comes into the presence of the Father and prays for himself, for his own disciples, and for those who will come to experience faith through their witness. Intercessory prayer is priestly action, and John 17 certainly records a significant moment in Jesus’ ministry of prayer which has priestly overtones. But the evangelist John never refers to Jesus as a priest. Only in Hebrews is Jesus designated a priest or high priest. The actual designation if the basis of the confession that God’s Son is our priest.”<sup>1</sup>

It is astounding and perhaps a curious thing that a person who appears only twice in the OT – the first time as a mysterious “king of Salem” in Genesis 14, and then, in one verse in Psalm 110:4, a verse which, based on its citation in Heb. 5:6,10; 7:17,21, points to Christ, would emerge in the argument of Hebrews as such a critical figure in God’s description and our understanding of the person of Christ as our High Priest.

The first mention of Melchizedek sets the stage for, even if somewhat cryptically, our first impression of him, but also establishing how we should think of him biblically, given his importance as revealed to us in Hebrews.

Some see Melchizedek’s appearance in Genesis 14 as a Christophany – as a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ Himself. Although there are over two dozen legitimate Christophanies in the OT, I would not categorize this as one of them. More legitimately, Melchizedek is a type of Christ, which is “*prospective, reflecting God’s sovereign plan for all of history.*”<sup>2</sup>

Thomas Schreiner presents a good argument against the idea that Melchizedek was an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ,

“Some throughout the history of the church have said that Melchizedek was the pre-incarnate Christ. The evidence for this reading is impressive. Melchizedek suddenly appears on earth, as if out of nowhere, celebrating Abraham’s victory with bread and wine. Furthermore, Heb. 7:3 seems to identify him as an eternal person, one who did not have a mother or father, neither the beginning of life nor the end of days. Despite the impressive evidence supporting such a reading, it is more persuasive to identify Melchizedek as a human being. When we read Genesis 14 carefully, it is evident that Melchizedek isn’t a divine figure. He is “the King of Salem” ( 14:18 ), and

<sup>1</sup> William L. Lane, Hebrews-A Call to Commitment, 1985 / 2004 Regent College Publishing, Vancouver, p. 101

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 40

therefore he reigned as king at a particular time and place in history. Nor does the wording in 7:3 lend itself to the idea that Melchizedek was the pre-incarnate Christ. The text doesn't say that Melchizedek "was" the Son of God but that he was made like the Son of God ( 7:3 ). He isn't identified as the Son of God but compared to him. It is probable from the wording used here that Melchizedek was a type anticipating the coming of the Christ. The author exploits the silence of the text to draw a correspondence between Jesus Christ and Melchizedek. Unlike Levitical priests, no genealogy is presented for Melchizedek, showing that he is a priest of a different type."<sup>3</sup>

Hebrews 7:1 tells us that Melchizedek was the "King of Salem", and a "priest of the Most High God". This alludes to Genesis 14:18. This unique combination of priestly and kingly offices is also highlighted in Psalm 110 7:1,4 – which identifies David's 'son' as eternal Lord [ in fact Jesus uses this very passage to confound the Pharisees in Matt. 22:41-46 ], and also a priest in his own right – not Aaronic or Levitical, because within the OT priesthood, there could be no crossover into kingship. Kings who attempted to usurp the role of priest in the OT did not fare well – cf. I Sam. 13:8-14.

In Heb. 7:2-3, Melchizedek is named "King of righteousness" and King of Salem ( peace ). He is also said to be without father or mother. We must not over-interpret this to mean he literally had no parents ( this is likely where the idea that he was a Christophany comes from ), or that he wasn't born and didn't die, because then he would not be human.

A better way to understand why these things are said about him is that it contrasts ( prospectively ) the importance of the genealogy of the Levitical priesthood, which, according to Mosaic law must be meticulously traced and verified ( cf. Neh. 7:64; Ezra 2:62 ), therefore, "The silence about Melchizedek's ancestry, birth and death is significant typologically, for it demonstrates that his priesthood is of a different character than the Aaronic priesthood. Certainly, the language used here is not literally true of Jesus at every point, for he did have a mother."<sup>4</sup>

The reason that the Levitical priesthood was subject to such careful lineage requirements, is that this priesthood was a priesthood of dying men, and none of them were capable of securing salvation for anyone, so an orderly, controlled succession to office was essential. The passing on of their legacy was designed to keep the priesthood within certain families.

Melchizedek's priesthood, on the other hand, was a greater priesthood; that of a living High Priest – Jesus Christ – because, according to Heb. 7:16, "who ...has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Schreiner, p. 458

<sup>4</sup> Schreiner, p. 41

<sup>5</sup> Reference Richard Phillips, Hebrews, p. 228, on why Ezra and Nehemiah kept careful records of who qualified as a priest.

Melchizedek's priesthood is superior to the Levitical version, which, in fact does not even come onto the scene until Exodus 28, over 400 years after Genesis 14. Jesus could not be a Levitical priest or high priest, because He is from the tribe of Judah ( cf. Heb. 7:13-14 ). In Psalm 110:1,4, the Melchizedek priesthood is fulfilled in the Davidic King ( note 2 Sam. 7:8-16 – the Davidic Covenant; and also note Ps. 2:7 & LK 1:32-33 ), and that priesthood ( Ps. 110:4 ) will “*remain forever*”. This, of course, is literally true of Jesus, who has ( Heb. 7:16 ), “*an indestructible life*” and 7:25, “*always lives to make intercession for them*” [ “*those who draw near to God through him*”]. His priesthood is never-ending because He conquered death and because of His resurrection. That fact is foundational to establish the superiority of His priesthood, because while Political priests ended their tenure at death, Jesus continues to reign as High Priest and King forever.

Another significant fact regarding Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek in Genesis 14 is found in vv.19-24. Abraham is blessed by Melchizedek, and the greater always blesses the lesser in the Bible; but even beyond that, Abraham offers a tenth ( a tithe ) of the spoils of his recent victory. Note Heb. 7:2 & 7:4-10. Again, as it often does ( wait until we get to Hebrews 11 ), Hebrews supplies us with insight not spelled out in the OT accounts. Note vv. 9-10, which is highlighting the superiority and imprimatur<sup>6</sup> of Melchizedek over Abraham.

According to William lane, the structure of Hebrews 7 is comprised of 3 units of argument. In vv. 1-10, the author introduces the person of Melchizedek, drawing our attention to the facts in Genesis 14:17-20. Then in vv 11-25, the focus is still on Melchizedek, but now centered more on Psalm 110:4, compelling us to consider the High Priest who is like Melchizedek – the man, Jesus Christ. Then, in his concluding vv 26-28, the author moves past the OT passages to build a bridge of exposition of Jesus as our High Priest and sacrifice in Hebrews 8:1 – 10:18.<sup>7</sup>

So far, in our study of Hebrews, we have run across 4 verses that depict Christ as our High Priest – 3:1-2; 4:14,15; and 5:10.

One of the most striking aspects of Jesus' ministry as our High Priest is the way that Hebrews enables us to comprehend the significance of Him in this office. In Hebrews 7:1-28, the author explains for us why He is a High Priest like Melchizedek. There is no hint anywhere else in the NT about this ( as already mentioned ). If the Holy Spirit had not put the information in the Bible from Hebrews 7:1 – 10:18, this dimension of Jesus' character and roles would not have even been on our radar screens. William Lane tells us that this connection between Jesus and Melchizedek makes 2 important distinctions; (1) Jesus' appointment to the position of our High Priest was the action of God, and (2) Jesus is a unique High Priest because God raised Him from the dead. If He had not been raised from the dead, He would not have been qualified to be our High Priest.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Imprimatur; def. “official approval” i.e., Melchizedek was authorized by God to have this authority.

<sup>7</sup> Lane, p. 105

<sup>8</sup> IBID, Lane, p. 102

Before we move forward, we must deal with the statement in v. 3 that says, “*but resembling the Son of God, he continues a priest forever.*” This is describing Melchizedek. It does not mean he was a pre-incarnate Christ, but that due to his lack of a genealogy, he is a type of Christ, the Son of God. Philip Hughes comments, “The significance of the biblical silence is that it marks Melchizedek out as a type who in these respects resembles the Son of God, who alone exists everlastingly, from eternity to eternity. Surrounded by this silence, Melchizedek is the figure, but Christ is the reality.”<sup>9</sup>

## Melchizedek - Greater Than Abraham

vv. 4-7

Not only does this passage more than suggest that Melchizedek had a better priesthood than the Levitical priesthood, but by direct inference, it demonstrates Melchizedek’s superiority over Abraham. To a group of Jewish converts thinking of returning to Judaism where Abraham was revered<sup>10</sup>, this is an important aspect of the author’s argument on behalf of Christ, who is the antitype of Melchizedek. Here, in their own scriptures in the Torah, is one who is obviously ‘over’ Abraham.

In the Genesis 14 account, Abraham, fresh off the battlefield, victor, encounters Melchizedek, and immediately gives him a tenth of the spoils – verse 4 here spells it out. It is a widely accepted human principle in relationships that the superior blesses the inferior ( v. 7 ), and that the person who receives the tithes is greater than the one who gives them. Philip Hughes, citing Herveus, says, “If Melchizedek, who was a sign and shadow, is preferred to Abraham and to all the Levitical priests, how much more Christ, who is the truth and the substance! If a type of Christ is greater than he who has the promises, how much more so is Christ himself.”<sup>11</sup>

I am going to intentionally by-pass any discussion regarding OT tithing policies. It would be time consuming and would not add much to our understanding at this point.

In v. 5, the author provides a contrast ( with v.6 ) between the Levitical priests who took tithes from their people – by legal requirement – priests and the people alike were descendants of Abraham and living under the Mosaic Covenant. If we have read the OT, we have a basic understanding of the setup. The priests did not own land like every other tribe of Israel did, so the other 11 tribes were to pay a tithe in order for the priests to live and do the intercessory work God had planned for them to do.

Verse 6 provides the contrast to v. 5, by looking at this outsider, King of Salem, this priest who predated the Aaronic priesthood by many generations. This one whom Abraham paid a tithe to was not of Israel, not a descendent of Abraham, and yet was in a position of authority over him so that he could bless him “*who had the promises*”. A great man therefore, was being blessed by a greater one!

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<sup>9</sup> Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Eerdmans, 1987, p. 248

<sup>10</sup> Note John 8:33,39; Matt. 3:9; Phil. 3:4ff

<sup>11</sup> Hughes, p. 251

The author summarizes here in v. 7, to state that the relationship he's been describing is well known by all – to the extent that it is beyond dispute.

## Dying Men Versus One Who is High Priest Forever vv. 8-10

The contrast is now made about those who receive the tithes the author has been discussing. The OT priests were mortal – they died. Their role as priest or even high priest was temporal. The author will stress that point in Heb. 7:23-28. Since Genesis 14 says nothing about the death of Melchizedek, he is presented as a ( still ) living person, at least in type, and in this respect, he serves as a type of Christ, whose priesthood goes on forever ( Heb. 7:24; Ps. 110:4 ).

In fact, “the inference of Ps. 110:4 that he who is a priest after the order of Melchizedek is a priest forever ( Heb. 6:20-21 ) is drawn from what is tacitly<sup>12</sup> and typologically implied in the very structure of the Genesis narrative.”<sup>13</sup>

This idea ( vv. 9-10 ) of “Levi still being in the loins of Abraham” ( unborn, yet the seed will be planted years later through Jacob – Gen. 29:34 ) is a concept that we as Christians should be somewhat familiar with. The Apostle Paul has given us a parallel concept in Romans 5:12-21 & I Cor. 15:22. As we are all descendants of Adam, we have inherited through successive generations his sin nature, thus necessitating for each and every human being the need for divine salvation through Christ. Peter Lombard points out, “just as when Adam sinned those who were in his loins sinned, so when Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, those who were in his loins paid tithes.”<sup>14</sup>

In this Genesis 14 “chance” meeting between Melchizedek and Abraham, what was established is a permanent and significant relationship. The order of Melchizedek, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, is superior to the order of Levi because Christ has surpassed it in quality and longevity, and superseded it in effect. Christ also, in His sinlessness accomplished something no OT priest could ever accomplish - perfectly keeping the Law – and then became the substitutionary sacrifice desperately needed for salvation to become real. Levite priests could not save anyone, including themselves, even should one of them sacrifice their own life. As Hebrews 7:25 states, “*Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.*”

The author's point here? Tom Schreiner comments, “The Levites who collected a tenth from their brothers eventually died. Their priesthood concluded with their death, for they were mortal men. But the text says nothing of Melchizedek's death. Nothing is said about priests succeeding him. The text testifies, then, to a living priesthood; for the writer Melchizedek points to Jesus Christ as the resurrected one. Do the readers want to

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<sup>12</sup> Def'n – understood or implied without being stated

<sup>13</sup> IBID, p. 253

<sup>14</sup> IBID, p. 253

attach themselves to priests who die or to a great high priest who has conquered death and lives forever?"<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Schreiner, Hebrews, p. 213