

A Priest Forever: Christ and the Melchizedekian Priesthood

Submitted to

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Introduction

Very little is known about Melchizedek. Genesis recounts a brief run-in that he had with Abram and then he gets a passing mention in one of the Psalms. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, with so little from which to pull, the author¹ of the epistle to the Hebrews develops a significant parallel between Melchizedek and Christ, even going so far as to describe Melchizedek as a type of Christ. Genesis 14 is the only time the reader encounters Melchizedek, and that in what appears to be a chance meeting between he and Abram,² for it is Abram the story has been following up till this point in the text:

Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything

¹ Origen, an early church father, one wrote regarding authorship of Hebrews, "Who wrote the epistle, in truth, God alone knows." As such, throughout this paper, the author will be referred to as "author" or "writer" in the belief that while we may not know the human instrument, God anointed these words as his own to be included with the whole of Scripture. When necessary to use a pronoun, I will use the masculine as in the Greek text of Heb. 11:32, the author uses the masculine pronoun in a self-description.

² At this point in the Genesis account of Abram, he has not yet been renamed "Abraham." However, the author of Hebrews consistently uses "Abraham." As such, I will go back and forth between the two names interchangeably.

(Genesis 14:18-20).³

As mentioned above, his name resurfaces just one more time in the entire Old Testament; Psalm 110:4, "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.'"

That is it. Two those passages make up the complete sum of Old Testament references to Melchizedek. A veil of obscurity surrounds him. Who was he that he deserved the esteem the Scripture affords to him? Where did he come from? Where was he going when Abram passes him? Had Abram ever met Melchizedek before this encounter? What led Abram to give a tenth of the plunder from his recent military victories to him? What is the sacramental significance of Melchizedek serving bread and wine, if any?

The number of questions far outweighs the number of answers with respect to Melchizedek. Nevertheless, there is one more question, maybe more important than all the rest, and that is, what does the epistle writer expect his readers (including us) to learn from his excurses of this mysterious man? In order to answer this question, one must begin by placing Hebrews 7, and thus Melchizedek, within the framework of the author's argument in his epistle.

The Place of Hebrews 7 and Melchizedek in the Epistle

For as little as the Old Testament mentions Melchizedek, he becomes the central focus and pinnacle of the author's argument in Hebrews, both in terms of literary structure and content. Over the years, commentators and scholars have proposed a wide variety of structural outlines for the epistle. Consider the proposed outlines from both George Rice (Figure 1) and A. Vanhoye (Figure 2) in their respective writings on Hebrews:

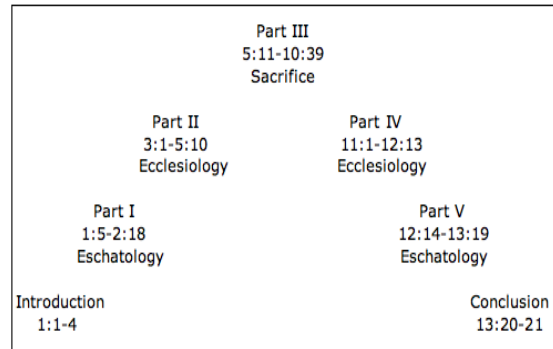
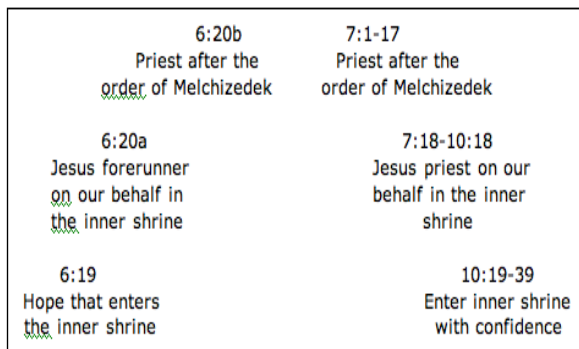


Figure 1. George Rice's outline of central Hebrews⁴

Figure 2. Vanoye's outline of Hebrews⁵

³ All quotes from the Bible are from the *New International Version*, except where noted otherwise.

⁴ George Rice, "The Chiasmatic Structure of the Central Section of the Epistle to the Hebrews," (Andrews University Seminary Studies).

For both of these authors, the priesthood and more specifically, the Melchizedekian priesthood, form the central literary component of the epistle. Likewise, the argument of the epistle reaches its pinnacle in chapter 7. The letter to the Hebrews begins with the claim that the Son is superior to the angels. While profound, this statement would not have been surprising to the astute among the original audience of the letter for they would recall, as does the author, Psalm 8 and the claim that, "You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet" (Heb. 2:7-8). Though created below the angels, God had ordained that it would be man that would judge the angels and be exalted above them.

With building intensity, the author's argument climbs from the Son's superiority over the angels to the Son's superiority over Moses. This is a far greater claim than the previous one, but again, still not unexpected. Even the Law of Moses anticipated one greater than Moses to come and bring about the Sabbath rest that was anticipated in the law (c.f. Hebrews 4). In Genesis 49, Jacob blesses each of his sons, but none more so than Judah to whom he promises, "The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his" (Gen. 49:10). Moses was of the line of Levi, not of Judah, from whom the great King of Israel would come. Similarly, the Old Testament anticipates the coming of a king from the line of David who would rule Jerusalem forever. As the epistle builds in intensity, the stakes are raised that this one, Jesus, is greater even than Moses.

Yet the author is not finished, for he goes to claim what no one would have expected and that is the insufficiency of the Aaronic priesthood. By law, God ordained Aaron and his descendents as the priests who were to intercede for the people before God to make atonement for the sins of the people by the blood of animals spilt in sacrifice. Throughout Israel's history, those outside the line of Aaron that dared offered sacrifices did so unacceptably and were punished for their disobedience. Marie Isaacs summarizes the point nicely, "To call a descendent of Judah 'high priest' would have been wholly unacceptable to Jewish tradition."⁶

Therein lies the pinnacle of the author's argument. It was profound that the Son was superior to the angels and bold to claim that Jesus was greater than Moses. However, both of those were to be expected by the Messiah. The great surprise climax of the argument is that the Aaronic priesthood was insufficient and that a priest, not of the line of Aaron, was needed. This "great" priest was to be of the order not of Aaron, but of Melchizedek.

⁵ A. Vanhoye, "Discussions Sur La Structure De L'epitre Aux Hebreus," (Biblica, 1974).

⁶ Marie E. Isaacs, "Priesthood and the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Heythrop Journal* 38, no. 1 (1997): 52.

Mike Beates in his Master's thesis writes succinctly, "It does seem clear that the seventh chapter of Hebrews stands at or very near the focal point of the writer's entire argument; it is the essence of his teaching."⁷ Both the literary structure of Hebrews and the flow of the argument place Melchizedek firmly as the central focus of the epistle, once again asking the question, what does the author expect his readers to learn about the Christ who is compared to Melchizedek when so little is known about him? Over the next several pages, we will endeavor to understand what the writer teaches us about Melchizedek by looking at individual phrases in the text of Hebrews chapter 7 and then their significance when applied to Christ.

1 Sentence, 3 Verses, 6 Phrases

Having established that the seventh chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews is both the literary and narrative center of the letter, attention must be given to the content of the chapter. The chapter opens with one long sentence (in the Greek text – English Bibles divide it into smaller sentences for readability) that spans three verses and contains six distinct descriptive clauses about Melchizedek. The key to understanding the significance of Melchizedek as a type of Christ lies here in this one sentence.

King of Salem and priest of God Most High (vs 1)

With the simple statement, "This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High" (Heb. 7:1), the epistle writer both introduces us to Melchizedek and draws a deliberate remembrance of the Genesis narrative, which reads, "Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High" (Gen. 14:18). In fact, that is all that the Genesis account reveals about him.

That Melchizedek was both a king and a priest is, however, extremely significant. The Old Testament develops three offices, prophet, priest and king. These three were distinct, each with their unique roles and responsibilities in God's economy for governing the social, political, and cultic life of Israel. Thus, for someone to be labeled as both a king and a priest is quite uncommon throughout Old Testament history as kingship required being of the line of David and priesthood required the line of Levi. "Yet only in Psalm 110:4 do we find a Davidic king actually addressed as 'priest' – and that, 'after the order of Melchizedek (i.e., of non-Levitical descent). It is to this psalm that the author of Hebrews appeals in his use of a priestly model for Jesus."⁸ Jesus, the Messiah, fulfilled not only the offices of king and priest of Melchizedek, but the office of prophet as well. In

⁷Michael S. Beates, "Melchizedek and Jesus: An Exegetical and Hermeneutical Study of Hebrews 7" (Biblical Theological Seminary, 1988), 14.

⁸ Isaacs: 52-53.

Christ, the three offices are united such that he speaks God's word to his people (prophet), mediates between God and man (priest) and rules over all heaven and earth (king).

He blessed Abraham and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything (vs 1-2)

When Abram met Melchizedek as he was returning from a great victory in battle, Melchizedek immediately blesses Abram in the name of the Creator God. As if it was unexpected enough for a pagan (non-Israelite) king to be blessing Abram in the name of the one true God, Abram responds in kind by giving his blessing a tenth of everything (which the author of Hebrews assumes in verse 4 to mean the plunder). The seventh chapter of Hebrews elaborates:

Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people – that is, their brothers – even though their brothers are descended from Abraham. This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater (Heb. 7:4-7).

God's covenant with Abraham is often referred to as the "Covenant of Promise" because God found such delight in blessing Abraham that he promised him a family too immeasurable to count and that from him would come kings of nations. The whole world was to be blessed through Abraham. Yet, "without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater" (vs 7).

Not only was Melchizedek greater than Abraham because he was the one who blessed, not the one who was blessed, but his greatness is evidenced by the great forefather Abraham giving a tithe from all he had to Melchizedek. Chapter 7 of Hebrews continues:

In the one case, the tenth is collected by men who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor (Heb. 7:8-10).

Levi, the tribe elected by God to be his priests and receive tithes and offerings from the rest of the nation of Israel, symbolically gave tribute to Melchizedek through Abraham. Thus, even the elected priesthood recognized that Melchizedek was the greater priest.

Throughout Israel's history, they appealed back to their status as Abraham's children to secure their promised blessing. They were descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and were God's chosen people from among all the earth. Many

years later Jesus encounters a woman in Samaria and asks her for a drink. In the course of their conversation she asks him, “Are you greater than our father Jacob?” (John 4:12). This woman could not believe that anyone, much less the man standing before her, could be greater than the forefathers. However, Melchizedek was greater. Therefore, was the man standing before her as he was greater than Abraham, greater than Isaac or Jacob and greater than Melchizedek? The man standing before her was God himself. Because he is greater, this man, the Lord Jesus Christ, is able to bless us in the name of his Father and is worthy of all our tithes, our offerings and even our very lives.

“King of righteousness” and “king of peace” (vs 2)

Names in Biblical times tended to carry more significance and weight than modern culture places on names. For example, Abraham and Sarah named their child Isaac, because, in the words of Sarah, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me” (Gen. 21:6). Thus, after summarizing the Genesis story between Melchizedek and Abraham, the author of Hebrews briefly elaborates on the meaning of both Melchizedek’s name and his title.

As verse 2 suggests, “his name means ‘king of righteousness.’” The study notes in the Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible clarifies, “In Hebrew the name Melchizedek is composed of two parts: *melek*, which means ‘king,’ and *tsedek*, which means ‘righteousness.’”⁹ In addition to name “king of righteousness,” he is the king of Salem, the Hebrew word for “peace.” So literally, Melchizedek is the king of righteousness and the king of peace.

Beates makes an important observation here stating that this concept is relatively minor in the course of the argument of the epistle. He says:

These etymological ideas do not play any major part of the author’s explicit intention. The furthest we can go is to say that there is an implicit connection made with the qualities that characterize the Lord Jesus, that of righteousness and peace.¹⁰

The author does not further develop the significance of the name. However, it should turn the reader to Christ, in who are righteousness and peace. As F.F. Bruce observes, “peace with God is based on the righteousness of God.”¹¹

⁹ Richard L. Pratt, ed., *Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Corporation, 2003), 1989.

¹⁰ Beates, 29.

¹¹ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), unknown.

Without father or mother, without genealogy (vs 3)

Having recounted briefly the Genesis account between Melchizedek and Abraham and a brief aside as to the meaning of Melchizedek's name, the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews further elevates Melchizedek by describing him in ways not hereto foreknown in the Scriptures. It is precisely here where belief that though we do not know the human agent, the letter is the very word of God to man because the writer adds info about Melchizedek that just isn't recounted anywhere else. The reader can hold that what is written about Melchizedek, though not based in the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, is still true.

This is important because the epistle writer makes a claim unique in all the Scriptures, that is, that Melchizedek was "without father or mother, without genealogy" (vs 3). Genealogies permeate the whole of the both the Old and New Testaments. Careful attention is paid to the lineages of the main characters. So, for someone to be said to be without a lineage is quite surprising indeed. In fact, Jerome H. Neyrey notes how unique this is in all of ancient literature:

The terms "without father" and "without mother" most commonly refer to children, either illegitimate, orphaned, or abandoned. That shameful sense is totally absent from Heb 7:3. On the contrary, Philo, discoursing on Gen 20:12, notes that Sarah is ameter, but not "without a father" (Ebr. 61; Heres 62). Moreover, from the ancient world we learn that Athena was ameter, but not "without a father," who was Zeus. Hephaistos was "without a father," but had a mother. Thus although some gods were either "without mother" or "without father," they were never said to be "without father or mother or genealogy," that is, totally ungenerated.¹²

Melchizedek, of whom the epistle writer declares to be "without father or mother," is then, in all of literature, without equal. Not even the deities in the Greek pantheon can claim what is attributed here to Melchizedek.

Melchizedek surely had a biological father and mother. However, the author's goal of stating that Melchizedek's lineage is unknown is not to say that Melchizedek simply appeared one day out of thin air. Rather, it serves to further his claim that the priesthood of Melchizedek stands outside of the line of Levi and Aaron. For many of his original readers, this would have been a most difficult concept to accept. The priesthood belonged to the Levites. It is almost as if the author wanted to make sure that his readers didn't miss the point, "He has no genealogy and even if you wanted a genealogy, he has no father or mother through whom to trace his lineage." T.K. Thomas elaborates on the nature of

¹² Jerome H. Neyrey, "'without Beginning of Days or End of Life' (Hebrews 7:3): Topos for a True Diety," in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1991), 443.

Melchizedek's priesthood:

In the Hebrew tradition, one became high priest on the basis of law, and performed one's high-priestly duties in accordance with law. Melchizedek's priesthood was beyond and above law; it was bestowed before the law was given and the covenant made.¹³

Melchizedek's priesthood is above, beyond and substantively different from that of Aaron and the Levites.

The author's intent is not simply to teach something more about a guy who had lived thousands of years previously. Rather, his intent is to draw the likeness of Melchizedek to Jesus. Jesus can be said to be "without father" in the ordinary biological sense, but not "without mother" because the Scriptures are clear that Mary was his biological mother. To dwell on this would be, however, to miss the point entirely. Jesus did have an earthly mother but not an earthly father. However, most significant is that he could not trace his lineage to Aaron. He was a Judahite, not a Levite. He was of the royal family, not the priestly family. He did not have the genealogical right to be a priest. At least not a priest in the order of Aaron. Jesus was of the royal line, the family of David.¹⁴ He was the Son of David who was to come, a perfect choice for the long awaited king. Nevertheless, he was also the priest who was to come and forever intercede before God on behalf of man. Jesus was a priest in the order of Melchizedek, a higher order, one above and beyond that of Levi. The Levitical priesthood would pass away but this new priest would live forever. As the epistle writer states, "And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life" (Heb. 7:15-16).

Without beginning of days or end of life (vs 3)

After declaring that Melchizedek was without a genealogy to be traced, he declares that Melchizedek is "without beginning of days or end of life" (Heb. 7:3). That is, he always was and always will be. He is living and not dead. In the Genesis account, Melchizedek appears for a moment, and then is gone again. He has no beginning and has no end. Again, Neyrey's insight proves helpful:

¹³ T. K. Thomas, "Melchizedek, King and Priest," *Ecumenical Review* 52, no. 3 (2000): 404-405.

¹⁴ Certainly the author of Hebrews could have further developed the significance of Melchizedek as a king as a type of Christ, but that would have been outside of his primary intention, which was to establish the priesthood of Christ. The kingship of Christ is developed in detail elsewhere in the New Testament; probably leaving the author to feel that the topic had been covered sufficiently to allow him to focus on the priesthood of Christ.

When Hebrews describes Melchizedek as having "neither beginning of days nor end of life," it speaks a language in which true deities were commonly described, namely, full eternity both in the past and imperishability in the future. True deities are defined in contrast with mortals; they are uncreated and eternal, whereas mortals come into being and pass out of existence. Hence, gods must be truly eternal, eternal in the past and imperishable in the future.¹⁵

Melchizedek is described in the "language in which true deities were commonly described." That he had no known past or future he could be said to be like a god, having existed forever in the past and will exist forever into the future.

Again, the author highlights this about Melchizedek to draw his readers to Christ. When confronted by an angry crowd and asked if he was greater than Abraham, Jesus responded, "Before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58). Jesus, the eternal Son of God, existed before Abraham or Melchizedek, even before Adam and Eve. He was there at the beginning and it was by his creative word that the world was made. He will be there at the end to rule and reign forever. The epistle writer goes on to explain the significance:

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Such a high priest meets our need – one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself (Heb. 7:23-27).

Every time a priest wanted to make atonement for the sins of the people, he would first have to make atonement for himself. This cycle would never end unless there was a high priest who both was not a sinner and thus did not need to make atonement for his own sin and second that he would never die. Jesus, the Great High Priest, "holy, blameless and pure," lives forever to intercede for his people.

¹⁵ Neyrey, 440.

He remains a priest forever (vs 3)

Everything preceding and everything that follows hinges on the last of the six phrases that comprise that one long verse. That phrase is, “like the Son of God, he remains a priest forever” (Heb. 7:3), referencing back to the lone psalm that names Melchizedek. This reads, “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind; ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek’” (Psalm 110:4). In fact, T.K. Thomas notes that:

In his approach to and his exposition of a christological priesthood, the writer of the letter quotes the Psalmist’s words ‘a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek’, or reproduces them with minor changes, no fewer than five times.¹⁶

The epistle writer has reminded us that Melchizedek was both a priest and a king, as was the Messiah to come. He exegeted his name to show that this man who was both priest and king was a righteous and peaceful king. By his word, he blessed Abraham and was worthy to receive gifts and offerings that had been dedicated to the Lord. He had no genealogy – “without father or mother.” Thus, his priesthood could not be traced back to Aaron. His priesthood was of a different sort. And because he was infinite and eternal, this priesthood would last forever.

The old priesthood failed to offer assurance because imperfect priests mediated it. Now had come a priest not of the order of Aaron, but of the order of Melchizedek. One who would be both king and priest. One who was righteous and full of peace. One who was worthy to receive all blessings and offerings. One who spoke the world into creation and now speaks blessings into the lives of those who bow before him. One who could not be traced back to Aaron, but back to the royal line, a true Son of David. And, in the order of Melchizedek, he was the one who would be a priest forever.

Jesus, the Son of God, is infinite and eternal. Thus, he can offer what no other high priest could offer and that is a permanent solution, bought not with the blood of doves and lambs and bulls, but bought with his own precious blood. Neyrey observes:

Jesus is a true divine figure because he fulfills the category of a genuine deity by his full eternity, a point made explicit both in the first and last chapters, as well as in the typology of Melchizedek in 7:3. In this, the christology of Hebrews makes significant strides toward formally acclaiming Jesus as “true God from true God.” In this he begins to make ontological and not just functional

¹⁶ Thomas: 405.

statements about Jesus.¹⁷

In his gospel, John develops a Christology of Jesus as the prophet, the word of God. Matthew and Luke, among other New Testament writings, elaborate on Jesus as the king who would reign forever in the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, nowhere else in the New Testament is a doctrine of the priesthood of Christ developed. As Fletcher-Louis, in his article entitled, "Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah," writes, "And throughout the New Testament Jesus is hailed 'messiah', 'Son of David', where it is only Hebrews, at the margins of the canon, that there is any explicit interest in Jesus' high priesthood."¹⁸ By taking his readers back to Melchizedek and drawing out the typology between he and Christ, the author of the epistle to the Hebrews develops the priesthood of Christ, offering his readers a full, balanced Christology. Just as he is the one who was the Word at the beginning and by His word all creation will pass away and just as He will reign over the new heavens and the new earth, so also will this Jesus intercede before God's throne on behalf of his children as a priest forever.

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¹⁷ Neyrey, 449.

¹⁸ Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis, "Jesus as the High Priestly Messiah: Part 1," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 4, no. 2 (2006): 162.

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