

Hebrews 7: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Hebrews chapter 7. For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him. And to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever. See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils. And those descendants of Levi who received the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man, who does not have his descent from them, received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. In the one case tithes are received by mortal men, but in the other case by one of whom it is testified that he lives. One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood, for under it the people received the law, what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron. For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. For the one of whom these things are spoken belong to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. For it is witnessed of him, you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. For on the one hand a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness, for the law made nothing perfect. But on the other hand a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.

And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath. But this one was made a priest with an oath, by the one who said to him, The Lord has sworn, and will not change his mind, you are a priest forever. This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant. The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing an office. But he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 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. For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests. But the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a son who has been made perfect forever. In chapter 7 the author of Hebrews moves on to discuss the character of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek is relevant to his discussion, because he quoted Psalm 110 verses 1 to 4 earlier on. The Lord says to my Lord, sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool. The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies. Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments from the womb of the morning. The dew of your youth will be yours. The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind. You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek. Having introduced this difficult text into the discussion, the author of Hebrews wants to consider the character of Melchizedek and what his priesthood tells us about the priesthood of Christ.

Melchizedek is a strange and unexpected figure. He only appears once, and rather abruptly, in an Old Testament narrative, at a surprising and significant juncture, yet without any real explanation in the text. We find him in Genesis chapter 14 verses 14 to 20. When Abram heard that his kinsmen had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. And he divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus. Then he brought back all the women and the people. After his return from the defeat of Chedoraimah and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the valley of Sheva, that is, the king's valley. And Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine.

[5 : 05] He was priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said, Blessed be Abram by God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.

And Abram gave him a tenth of everything. Melchizedek is a mysterious character, and the fact that he is mentioned as he is in Psalm 110 verse 4, is probably testimony to the fact that he was already a source of interest, long before the book of Hebrews was ever written. Having seen the significance of Psalm 110 verse 4, we are propelled back into Genesis chapter 14, to consider why Melchizedek might actually be raised as a figure of importance. Even within that text, there are ways that he stands out. First of all, we notice that he is given no introduction. He appears briefly on the page of the text, and then vanishes, almost as suddenly as he had first appeared. However, he quite clearly stands out from the character of the king of Sodom. While Abram refuses to receive anything from the king of Sodom, lest the king of Sodom say that he had made Abram rich, not only does he receive a blessing from this character, Melchizedek, the king of Salem, he also gives him a tithe of everything that he has. Elsewhere, the tithe is always given to God, or to the appointed priests. Yet here is a figure who is not descended from Abraham, who is receiving this tribute of a tenth as the priest, and is also blessing Abram. He is identified as the priest of

God Most High, he is a priest of the true God, yet he is not someone who belongs to the Levitical priesthood that will later be established. Indeed, we are given no details of his genealogy, or what qualifies him for his role. By itself, this would invite much reflection. However, when we look even more at the context, further things open up. Many of the stories of Genesis, and particularly the story of Abraham, have anticipatory qualities. They play out the story of the descendants of Abraham in advance. In chapter 12, Abram goes into the land, there's a famine that leads him away from the land, he goes down to Egypt, there are plagues upon Pharaoh, and then he is let out with many gifts.

He goes back to the land of Canaan, which is inhabited by the Canaanites at the time. He spies out the land, the Lord declares that he will give the land to him. Having separated from his nephew Lot, Lot is then captured. Abram wins a great victory against those who have captured Lot, and engages in the sort of conquest of the entire land. And having done all of that, he is met by the king of Jerusalem, who comes bearing bread and wine. He is described as a priest of God Most High, and then he blesses Abram and receives a tithe. As a figure in the story, Abram represents his descendants. They are going to be delivered from Egypt, they're going to spy out the land, and then they're going to win a great conquest in it. And finally, they will arrive at Jerusalem. But just at the point where we would expect Abram, representing his descendants, including the tribe of Levi, to take centre stage, we have this other mysterious figure. And that, I believe, is why he is seen to be so significant. The point is not that the character of Melchizedek was necessarily some miraculous figure.

Rather, it's what he stands for as a figure. Whoever he was as a historical person, he stands for so much more in the context of the text, and the way it has been told. He is clearly anticipating and standing for something very important. Yet it is very mysterious to us. Much as we might wonder about the significance of the sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah, and the importance of the ram caught in the thicket, and other details like that, we might wonder about the character of Melchizedek. Who does he represent? What does he stand for? Why is this figure presented as someone who is greater than Abraham, who takes the centre stage at this very important moment? Of course, as he is the king of Salem, he might make us think of David, who became the king of Jerusalem. The priest-king of Jerusalem corresponds to a Davidic Messiah that will arise. And having been raised up as this character, as a king of righteousness and peace, he will bring about something that eclipses the Levitical priesthood.

[9 : 10] Consequently, although Christ does not fulfil the requirements for the Levitical priesthood, he can belong to a different type of priesthood, a different order, the order of Melchizedek. He is the one who is prefigured by this character within the story of Genesis chapter 14. And once this foreshadowing is appreciated, so many of the mysteries and conundrums of the story of Genesis 14 fall into place. We begin to understand what this mysterious character of Melchizedek is doing there at that juncture. We also begin to understand better Psalm 110 verse 4, why this great figure who is elevated might be described as having the priesthood of Melchizedek. And now that we have an eternal priest according to this order, we no longer need the Levitical priesthood, which was only temporary. That priesthood was never going to bring perfection. And in contrast with that priesthood, appointment to this priesthood comes with an oath. The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind.

You are a priest forever. Because Christ is an eternal priest according to the order of Melchizedek, he is able to bring us to God in a far greater way than any of the Levitical priests could do, not just because they were sinful, but because their priesthood was limited.

His priesthood eclipses theirs. He is so much more suited as a high priest to bring us to God. He is one who is holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens.

He is like the unblemished lamb, the one that can represent people and bring them into God's presence. He is the one who participates fully in flesh, but is not stained by its sin. And as a result, he can represent us fully and compassionately enter into our life while still being able to act in a powerfully vicarious manner for us. As he is separated from sin, he does not need to offer sacrifices for himself first, nor indeed does he need to offer repeated sacrifices for the people.

He offered himself once and for all as a complete and perfect sacrifice, one that was perfectly suited to bring people to God. A question to consider. What role is the immortality of Christ playing in the author of Hebrews' argument?

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