

The Priesthood Superior To Aaron

where the forerunner has entered for us, *even* Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. **Hebrews 7:1** For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, 2 to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated "king of righteousness," and then also king of Salem, meaning "king of peace," 3 without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually.

4 Now consider how great this man was, to whom even the patriarch Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils. 5 And indeed those who are of the sons of Levi, who receive the priesthood, have a commandment to receive tithes from the people according to the law, that is, from their brethren, though they have come from the loins of Abraham; 6 but he whose genealogy is not derived from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. 7 Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better. 8 Here mortal men receive tithes, but there he *receives them*, of whom it is witnessed that he lives. 9 Even Levi, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak, 10 for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him. (Heb. 6:20-7:10)

Very few religions have ever been priestless religions. Almost every religion has called for priests, because every religion has some kind of law that the gods or God has, which man has broken. Priests then mediate between the deity and mankind, the lawbreakers. In fact, the Latin word for priest, *pontifex*, literally means bridge-builder. The priest builds or at least maintains a bridge between a holy God and a sinful people.

Biblical religion, from the Tanakh to the New covenant insists that we have always needed, still need, and will always need a priest. The book of Hebrews in particular is about finding and being faithful to the ultimate, final priest. Christianity is not a priestless religion. Quite the opposite. Christianity is based upon the person and work of the final Priest, the last priest, the greatest priest of them all. We might say that when it comes to priests, Christianity will settle for nothing but the best.

The writer of Hebrews is in pursuit of proving that. But he had a tough audience, originally. They say the French know food, the Italians know opera, and the Swiss know clocks. Perhaps, and often enough, one ethnic group develops something of a specialty knowledge. The Hebrews of biblical times, for example, knew priests. The priests stood close to the top of a religious-political system that was meant to be a theocracy. The Jews knew priests: their qualifications, their duties, and their lineage. The priests were at the centre of Jewish religious life: sacrifice, Temple, offerings.

That's why, when the Temple was destroyed in A. D. 70, it changed forever the character of Jewish religion. The priests were no longer the religious leaders. Judaism became a rabbinic, scribal religion, instead of one focused on atonement of sin, holiness, and access to God. Today, the only remnants of those priests are Jewish people with the surnames Cohen, which is the Hebrew word for priest. Some synagogues will still have only a Cohen give the Aaronic or priestly blessing on the congregation.

But if you had taken any Hebrew from the time of Moses all the way to the time of Jesus, he would not have recognised a Judaism without priests, without sacrifice, without a Temple. And at the time of the writing of this book, the Temple was still standing in Jerusalem, the priests were operating, well over 8500 of them operating with the Temple. The Hebrews knew priests: what they were to wear, how old they were allowed to be, what tribe they were from, how they were appointed, and what they were to do.

So when a writer begins insisting that Yeshua of Galilee (of Nazareth of all places!), from the tribe of Judah is actually the Messianic High Priest, any Jew would begin refuting him. "A priest must be

from Levi, not Judah!” “The High Priest is to be a Levite descended from Aaron!” “Priests don't select themselves; they must be born into it and then appointed by a ritual of consecration!”

But if Jesus is the Messiah, then He is the prophet, priest and king. The writer has to prove that to a sceptical audience. So the largest section of Hebrews arguing that Jesus is the supreme and superior office-bearer of all three is this section on Jesus, the Final and ultimate priest. He took just a chapter and half to show Jesus is King superior to angels, just two chapters to show us Jesus is the prophet superior to Moses or Joshua, but the section on priests is really four chapters long, part of chapter 5, all of seven, eight, nine, and part of ten. He will deal with every possible angle of the Messiah-priest: his rank, appointment, what covenant He operates under, what tabernacle He ministers in, what sacrifices He offers. By the time he's finished in chapter 10, you should be persuaded that Jesus is the ultimate priest.

What he is going to do in chapter 7 is an incredibly wise exposition of two Old Testament texts: Genesis 14, and Psalm 110. At the end of chapter 6, he again quoted Psalm 110:4, which says 4 The LORD has sworn And will not relent, "You *are* a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek." (Ps. 110:4). He quotes that verse five times in this book: it is a major verse for His whole argument. Psalm 110, we read that Messiah, David's Lord (Adonai) has been coronated by Yahweh. Not only does Messiah receive the kingdom, but according to verse 4, Messiah is appointed as a priest by an oath of God the Father. Messiah is a king-priest.

But Messiah is not a priest of the Levitical line, but a royal priest of the Melchizedekian line. Any Jew would know that Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20) was the only other biblically recognised priest of the Most High God. A Hebrew would have known of only two biblical orders of priests: the Levitical, and the Melchizedekian. Chapter 7 is his proving that Messiah belongs to the Melchizedekian, and that it is the final, superior and ultimate priesthood.

So, to follow his logic through this passage, we'll begin with the first ten verses, where he will show us that we want a priest who belongs to the Melchizedekian line. We want the ultimate priest, not an inferior one. If we have to choose between the Levites and Melchizedek, we will want the superior priesthood of Melchizedek. We can look for two stages in his argument: the story of Melchizedek, and then the superiority of Melchizedek.

I. The Story of Melchizedek

Hebrews 7:1 For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, 2 to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated "king of righteousness," and then also king of Salem, meaning "king of peace," 3 without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually.

In three verses, the writer rehearses all we know about Melchizedek from the Genesis account. We can read that again. Abraham wages a mini-war against a confederacy of kings so as to recover his nephew who had been taken captive.

16 So he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his brother Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the people. 17 And the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that *is*, the King's Valley), after his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who *were* with him. 18 Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he *was* the priest of God Most High. 19 And he blessed him and said: "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; 20 And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand." And he gave him a tithe of all. (Gen. 14:16-20)

Who was this man?

His position: He was the king of Salem. Salem is almost certainly what became Jerusalem. He was actually the leader and king of that city. But uniquely, he was also the priest of the Most High God. This is not the national covenant name of God, Yahweh, but the name El Elyon. Melchizedek didn't seem to know God by the name Yahweh. Melchizedek of course, is not a Hebrew. He is one of the dwellers in Canaan. But he is a believer. He had come to know the true and living God apart from the covenants of Israel.

His actions: For some reason, when Abraham returned from the war, Melchizedek came out to meet him, blessed him, gave him bread and wine. Abraham then gave Melchizedek a tithe, a tenth of all the spoils.

His name: 2 to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated "king of righteousness," and then also king of Salem, meaning "king of peace,

The writer of Hebrews, like many Jewish people of his time, saw great significance both in his given name, and in his title. His given name, Melchizedek, is literally, king of righteousness. His title, king of Salem, or Shalom, means king of peace. Of course, this is exactly what priests deal with: the righteousness of God, and how to restore peace with God through sacrifice. A beautiful verse in the psalms captures what Messiah will do. 10 Mercy and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed (Ps. 85:10)

His genealogy. In verse 3, we read about his lineage, his genealogy. 3 without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually.

What does this mean? We can easily misunderstand what he is doing here. The writer of Hebrews has such a high regard for the biblical text that he sees meaning not only in its statements but also in its silences. Genesis, where Melchizedek is mentioned, is a book of genealogies. Anyone who is someone can be placed in a genealogy, either in chapter 4, chapter 5, chapter 10, chapter 11. Not only do we know who someone is descended from, but also when he died.

But the thing about Melchizedek is that he simply seems to pop into the biblical narrative, and then disappear again. We don't read of his parents. In the Greek, he is literally *apator*, *amator* – terms used in secular Greek birth certificates for illegitimate children. We don't read when he was born, and when he died.

Now that has led some people to suggest that Melchizedek was an angelic being, perhaps Michael. But as we have seen, a priest needs to be sympathetic with the two parties he is mediating between. Only a human priest can be a true go-between. Others have suggested that this is a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ. The problem with that is that it borders on the heresy of Docetism. Docetism was the false teaching that said that when Jesus came to earth, He did not actually come in the flesh. He was not really born; he simply manifested the appearance of a real human. You see that false idea condemned in John's Gospel and epistles.

But to imagine that the Son of God was the king-priest of Salem suggests the same thing: that long before Bethlehem, He took the appearance of a man, and lived among people for years, perhaps decades – long enough to be called its king-priest. But all along, He would not really have been a true human, just an appearance of one. That seems very unlike what we see in Scripture. The theophanies of the Old Testament are very brief, momentary appearances, not decades-long appearances.

In fact, there is a clue in the book of Joshua that helps us to see that Melchizedek was almost certainly a real man, a godly man, living in Jerusalem. Look in Joshua 10:1:

Compare Joshua 10:1-4: Now it came to pass when Adoni-Zedek king of Jerusalem heard how Joshua had taken Ai and had utterly destroyed it-- as he had done to Jericho and its king, so he had done to Ai and

its king-- and how the inhabitants of Gibeon had made peace with Israel and were among them, 2 that they feared greatly, because Gibeon was a great city, like one of the royal cities, and because it was greater than Ai, and all its men were mighty. 3 Therefore Adoni-Zedek king of Jerusalem sent to Hoham king of Hebron, Piram king of Jarmuth, Japhia king of Lachish, and Debir king of Eglon, saying, 4 "Come up to me and help me, that we may attack Gibeon, for it has made peace with Joshua and with the children of Israel." (Jos. 10:1-4)

Notice, this man is also the king of Jerusalem. Notice the similarity of name. Adoni-zedek means Lord of righteousness. Very likely, the kings of Jerusalem kept that word in their names. There's even evidence that there was a Canaanite god that went by the title Tzedek, in which case, he was the pagan god of Salem. But as you can tell, this is a very real and ungodly man, bent on attacking Israel. His ancestor, whether biologically or just by dynasty, Melchizedek, was a godly king-priest, who knew and worshipped the true and living God and not the false gods of Canaan,

So I believe he was a normal, mortal man, who knew and served the living God.

The point the writer is making is this: as far as the text is concerned: Melchizedek as a character has no genealogy, no parentage, no recorded birth or death. So for this writer, that makes him like the Son of God, as if he is pre-existent in the past, and everlasting into the future. And again, because as far as the text goes, we read that he *was* truly a priest of the Most High God, but we do not read of his death or of who succeeded him, it is as if his priesthood is perpetual. It does not pass down to others; sons don't succeed father here.

It's encouraging that when we read of him, and of the Gentiles in the book of Job, it shows that God's Holy Spirit has ever been active in the world, drawing people to Himself, even if they were not Hebrews, or under the Abrahamic Covenant. Perhaps there have been thousands of Jobs and Melchizedeks before the time of Christ, who had come to faith through general revelation, and some special revelation not known to us. That prepares us for something else: the priesthood of Melchizedek is before Abraham and after Levi. He is not only a priest for the Hebrews, but for all the world.

How did Abraham know who he was? How did Melchizedek know who Abraham was? The text doesn't tell us. But something must have been happening in Salem, or Melchizedek must have had such a reputation that Abraham immediately recognised him. There's a tradition in the Jewish sages that Melchizedek was actually Shem, the son of Noah. Using the dates of the Hebrew Bible, it is true that Shem would still have been alive, around 465 years old when Abraham was 75. Certainly Shem could well have been the devoted priest of the God who caused the Flood that he had lived through. Shem was not a Hebrew, but in fact, the father of all the Semitic people. If he lived there, he would have been held in reverent esteem by all. That's speculation, but it is possible.

Now that's Melchizedek's story, his biography. But the writer wants to show why Jesus, belonging to this order is superior, final and ultimate.

II. The Superiority of Melchizedek

4 Now consider how great this man was, to whom even the patriarch Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils. 5 And indeed those who are of the sons of Levi, who receive the priesthood, have a commandment to receive tithes from the people according to the law, that is, from their brethren, though they have come from the loins of Abraham; 6 but he whose genealogy is not derived from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. 7 Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better. 8 Here mortal men receive tithes, but there he *receives them*, of whom it is witnessed that he lives. 9 Even Levi, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak, 10 for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him. (Heb. 6:20-7:10)

His whole argument here has to do with tithing. Giving a tenth of your income was not something that began with Abraham. Archaeologists have found that it seems to have been a practice in the ancient near East. In fact, tithing was one way you acknowledged the royalty or deity of someone or something.

Everything in these verses is about who paid tithes to whom. Abraham, the great patriarch, the father of faith, the great man of promise, paid tithes to Melchizedek. And I think it is worth noting how Abraham treated the king of Sodom by contrast. Both the king of Sodom and the king of Salem come out to meet Abraham. But though the king of Sodom offers Abraham all the spoils, Abraham quickly distances himself from the king of Sodom and his city. Abraham pays homage to Salem, and utterly rejects Sodom.

Verse 5 gets our writer to the contrast he wants to make between two priesthoods. The Levites received tithes. Israel had to bring their ten percent of their goods and deliver it to the priests – the Levites. Even though the Levites were brothers with their fellow Israelites, they were given a special rank, a special status where the other children of Abraham tithed to them.

Israelites were forced by the law to tithe to other Israelites, the Levites. And all of them were descendants of Abraham, meaning they were less than Abraham. Remember how Jesus asked the Pharisees how David's son (or descendant) could also be David's Lord? Jews thought of descendants as lesser in rank than the ancestor.

Now here comes the contrast: 6 but he whose genealogy is not derived from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. 7 Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better

Abraham, greater in rank than all his descendants, voluntarily and willingly, without any commandment, paid tithes to Melchizedek, showing he thought Melchizedek was his superior. Melchizedek is not from Levi or from Israel at all. Furthermore, Melchizedek blessed Abraham, the way Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, the way Jacob blessed his twelve sons. The greater blesses the lesser.

Who is greater? Melchizedek, or Abraham's descendant, Levi? Which priesthood is superior?

Verse 9 and 10 is the clincher.

9 Even Levi, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak, 10 for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him. (Heb. 6:20-7:10)

Levi – the tithe-receiver, the priests who outrank all other Israelites, was, in a sense, also paying tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham, because he was still a future descendant of Abraham. The Bible teaches something called natural headship, where descendants are like smaller and smaller divisions of one original man. Once the whole human race was one man, Adam. But every descendant of Adam, became a smaller division of that race, but we all resolve back into Adam. That's why Adam could represent us in the Garden, and it's why Paul says we all sinned in Adam.

So there was a time when the whole Hebrew nation was one man. Isaac, Jacob, the twelve sons of Jacob, and all their descendants were at this time, as it were, in Abraham. Abraham represented them all. So here then you have these two priesthoods meeting: the Melchizedekian, and the Aaronic-Levitical. And who bows to whom?

And then lastly, he wants to make a point about permanence, which he will take further in verses 11 and following.

8 Here mortal men receive tithes, but there he *receives them*, of whom it is witnessed that he lives.

At the time of Hebrews being written, the Temple was still standing, and Levites, who were mortal men received tithes. But Melchizedek is not recorded as dying. That could mean again, that he is immortal as far as the record goes, being a type of the true immortal Christ. It could possibly mean that Melchizedek, like Enoch, was raptured, taken to Heaven without dying. Either way, the point is clear. Melchizedek's priesthood is superior because it doesn't die.

So stand back and see the superiority of this priesthood: 1) Melchizedek has a priesthood of righteousness. 2) Melchizedek has a priesthood of peace, and the two meet in him. 3) Melchizedek has a royal priesthood, because he is a king. 4) Melchizedek has a priesthood based on his person, not on inheritance or genealogy. 5) Melchizedek's priesthood is eternal and does not end. 6) And Melchizedek is not a Hebrew, or a priest only for the Hebrews. His is a priesthood before Abraham and after Levi: a universal priesthood for all people. Righteous, peace-bringing, royal, personal, eternal, universal.

Now perhaps you're listening to this, and it sounds like an argument between two rabbis. Maybe you say, I'm in no danger of preferring the Levitical priesthood over Christ's. How does this matter?

First, it matters that you admit that you need a priest. It matters that you do not buy the illusion that you can approach God on your own works, and be accepted by Him on your own terms. It is not whether you need a priest. If you understand at all the holiness of God, then the question is not whether you need a priest, but which priest you will select.

Second, it matters that you do not choose any priesthood except the final and ultimate priest.

You need the Priest who replaces all priests. Righteous, peaceful, kingly, personal, eternal, and universal.