

“The Guarantor of a Better Covenant”

The Tenth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 7:1-28; Genesis 14:17-24

You don't hear much these days about Melchizadek. Other than a brief discussion of his priesthood on the *White Horse Inn* a while back, the last time anyone mentioned Melchizadek to me was when a nineteen year old Mormon elder stood at my door and told me that he belonged to the Melchizadek priesthood—whatever that means. It has long been common for Christian people to use biblical names for their children, yet I don't recall ever meeting anyone named “Melchizadek.” No doubt, this lack of interest in Melchizadek is because he is a rather obscure and mysterious figure. Yet according to the author of Hebrews, Melchizadek figures prominently in redemptive history as a type of Jesus Christ. Understanding who this man is as well as the role he plays in redemptive history is essential to the author's case for the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus. Although nobody talks about Melchizadek these days, perhaps we should.

We are continuing our series on the Book of Hebrews, and have come to chapter 7. In this section of the Book of Hebrews the author returns to a discussion he began in chapter 5 when he cited from Psalm 110:4 which speaks of the future messianic king as being a high priest forever after the order of Melchizadek. Having made his initial point about Melchizadek's priesthood, the author of Hebrews then broke off his discussion about Melchizadek to express his frustration with this congregation when he realized that those to whom he was writing probably would not be interested in his theological arguments which demonstrated by Jesus was superior to Moses, to angels, and to the priests of Israel. This lack of interest in what the Old Testament teaches about Jesus Christ, sadly, was indicative of the circumstances under which a number of those in the church receiving the Letter to the Hebrews had quickly wilted under persecution, given up on Christianity, and then returned to Judaism.

Having made his initial theological point about Melchizadek, and realizing that his audience didn't really care, the author then rebuked this church for acting like children who were unwilling to press on to maturity. In chapter 5:11-14, he writes, “*about this [the superiority of Jesus Christ] we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*” Not only is Melchizadek's priesthood an essential plank in the author's overall case for the superiority of Jesus Christ, the fact the people didn't care about the life of Melchizadek supplying powerful evidence for the superiority of Jesus' priesthood reveals their immaturity, prompting the author's ire and leading to his warning about apostasy in Hebrews 5:11-6:12.

The author is not saying that lack of interest in Melchizadek's priesthood is the first step toward apostasy. But he is saying to a church where many have turned their backs upon Jesus Christ and committed the sin of apostasy that they need to understand how the Old Testament directed the Jewish people to expect the coming of Jesus as Israel's Messiah. This is why the author spent so much time proving from the Old Testament that Jesus is the mediator of a new and better covenant, and that one in whom Israel's priesthood, the office of prophet, and that of messianic king, find their fulfillment. These new Christians must grow to maturity and that means understanding how the Old Testament points them ahead to the coming of Christ. It also means realizing that Melchizadek figures prominently in this case.

To understand why Melchizedek is so important to the author's case for the superiority of Christ's priesthood, we will begin with a review of Genesis 14 (our Old Testament lesson), then we will go through the author's discussion of Melchizedek in Hebrews 7, before we wrap up by summarizing how this mysterious individual plays such an important role in redemptive history.

So, let us begin with our Old Testament lesson in Genesis 14:17-24, when Melchizedek first appears upon the redemptive-historical scene.

As recounted in verses 17-18, Abram was returning from his victory over the four kings who had captured Lot when Melchizedek extended to him a fellowship meal offered in the name of *El Elyion*, another name for YHWH. "*After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.)*" Melchizedek is a Canaanite royal name and can be translated as "king of righteousness." Salem is likely an ancient name for the city better known to us as Jerusalem. How it is that a Canaanite king became a worshiper of YHWH we are never told. But it is in his capacity as a priest of YHWH that Melchizedek extends a fellowship meal to Abram after his remarkable victory over the kings as described in verse 17.

In verses 19-20, Melchizedek pronounces a blessing upon Abram. "*And [Melchizedek] blessed [Abram] 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!'*" Melchizedek's blessing reaffirms that it was the Most High God who sovereignly ensured Abram's victory. In an acknowledgment of Melchizedek's blessing, as well as the truth that YHWH—who is Lord of all the earth, not just Canaan—gave Abram this victory, we read that "*Abram gave [Melchizedek] a tenth of everything.*" This offering (or a tithe—a tenth) was from the spoils of war taken from the defeated kings.

According to verse 21, instead of offering a blessing to Abram and at the same time refusing to acknowledge the Lordship of YHWH, the king of Sodom demanded that he be given the prisoners of war, who would now serve as slaves. "*And the king of Sodom said to Abram, 'Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself.'*" Abram rejected the king of Sodom's demands. "*But Abram said to the king of Sodom, 'I have lifted my hand to the Lord, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.' I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me. Let Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre take their share.'*" Although there is not much historical information given here, it is clear that Abram and Melchizedek trust in the power of YHWH, they attribute the victory to him, they are YHWH's servants, while the king of Sodom trusts only in the power of the sword.

Nothing more is said of Melchizedek in Genesis, but he appears again in Psalm 110:4 which reads "*the Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.'*" As we have seen when we covered this passage in chapter 5, the Psalmist sees Melchizedek as an important figure in redemptive history because he is both a priest and a king and he rules from Jerusalem. The two offices of priest and king were held by different individuals in Israel, although the implication from the Psalmist is that the future Messiah of Israel will hold both these offices simultaneously.

It is in this sense then that Melchizedek becomes a type of Christ, because Christ holds both these offices, as well as the office of prophet as foretold by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15. "*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen.*" Melchizedek rules from Jerusalem, and holds two distinct offices (priest and king) simultaneously. He is both the king of Salem and a priest of God the Most High. In Psalm 110, he is a forerunner of the

Messiah, and in Genesis 14, even Abraham (the man of faith) pays Melchizadek a tithe upon defeating his enemies. Melchizadek may not be familiar to us, but he has an impressive resume nonetheless.

This, then, is the Old Testament background for chapter 7 of Hebrews, in which the author returns to the theological point he was trying to establish back in chapter 5, before he broke off to issue his warning about professing faith in Christ for a time and then falling away (apostasy).

It is important to remember that while we must take the Genesis account of Melchizadek as historical, and consider it in its original context to understand it correctly, as Christians we also believe that the best interpreter of the Old Testament is the New. It is likely that the reason why the author devotes so much time to Melchizadek in the Book of Hebrews is because there was a great deal of speculation among Jews (and in the early church) about this mysterious figure. Some Jews tied Melchizadek to the line of Shem, which would explain why Abraham honored him. Yet another Jewish tradition sees Melchizadek as a type of the restored priesthood (the Mormons adopt a form of this legend), yet not the same priesthood which the Messiah possesses.¹ Jews argued this point to prevent Christians from doing what the author of Hebrews does—demonstrate that an Old Testament figure such as Melchizadek is clearly a forerunner of Jesus Christ.

In the first century it was common for Hellenistic Jews (Jews in religion, Greek in culture) to understand the story of Melchizadek in largely allegorical terms. In doing so they were following the interpretation of Genesis 14 introduced by the famous Jewish philosopher Philo, who argued that Melchizadek gave Abram bread and wine so that Abram's soul might be seized with an intoxication of the divine, enabling him to understand how the Logos (the particular) relates to the One (the universal).

It falls to the author of Hebrews to give us the proper understanding of the account of Melchizadek, and to show this largely Jewish congregation how typology (which is finding Jesus Christ in the types and shadows of the Old Testament in those same places Jesus did when he taught the apostles) is not the same thing as an allegorical interpretation where every element of the story is thought to be a symbol of some deeper and hidden spiritual truth which the enlightened teacher brings out into the open.

Recall that at the end of chapter 6 the author is discussing the promise that God made to Abraham, pointing out that God's covenant promise was fulfilled through the person and work of Jesus Christ. In verses 19-20 he writes, "*we have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.*" Continuing this line of thought, in verses 1-2 of chapter 7, the author recounts the events of Genesis 14 we just considered. "*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.*" In a church where people were struggling with the question of why Christianity was a fulfillment of what was taught in the Old Testament, it is noteworthy that the author of Hebrews emphasizes the fact that even Melchizadek's name implies that peace with God comes through the righteousness of Christ.²

In verse 3, the author tells us that nothing is known about Melchizadek's origins (i.e., his family history).

¹ Bruce, Hebrews, 134.

² Bruce, Hebrews, 158-159.

He writes Melchizedek *“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.”* Some have taken this to mean that the figure of Melchizedek was either an angel or a Christophany (i.e., Melchizedek had no human parents). But all the author is saying is that nothing is known about Melchizedek’s origins (who his parents were and what family he came from). In other words, Scripture is silent about Melchizedek’s genealogy. All we do know is that Melchizedek was a priest of YHWH and a type of Christ. Because Melchizedek fills this role, the author of Hebrews says of him, *“See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils!”* We need not see Melchizedek as a symbol of some deep truth. Rather, because he was an historical individual and a priest of the God Most High, he is a type of Christ, and even the great Abraham paid tithes to him after victory in battle. Melchizedek’s priesthood must be superior to any priesthood which comes to Israel through the descendants of Abraham.

That this is the author’s point becomes clear in what follows in verse 5. *“And those descendants of Levi who receive 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.”* The Levites were given tithes by their fellow Israelites (who were also children of Abraham) to support the work of the priesthood, men who were to be physical descendants of Levi, and who were to act on the benefit of God’s people as commanded under the law. But Abraham took the spoils of war from the Canaanite kings and he gave a tenth of them to a Canaanite king named Melchizedek because he was a priest of the Most High God! Therefore, Melchizedek’s priesthood is superior to that of the descendants of Levi because Abram paid tithes to him! Says the author of Hebrews in verse 7, *“this man who does not have his descent from them [the Levites] received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.”*

In verse 8, the author adds another piece to his argument—Melchizedek’s priesthood is eternal while the Levitical priesthood is not. *“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.”* This does not mean that Melchizedek is eternal but that his priesthood lives on in the person of Jesus Christ. The author presses the point that Abram’s biological descendants figuratively paid tithes through Abram is yet another indication of the superiority of Melchizedek’s priesthood to that of the Levites. *“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.”*

Having made the point that Melchizedek’s priesthood is superior to that of the Levites, the author of Hebrews now proceeds to contrast Melchizedek’s priesthood with that of our Lord’s. The author begins with the inability of the law to render God’s people perfect—an especially important point in a church where people were considering returning to Judaism. In verse 11 we read, *“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?”* Although his line served as high priests, Aaron’s priesthood did not replace Melchizedek’s. Aaron too was a descendant of Abraham. Perfection did not come to Israel through the covenant God made at Sinai. It comes to God’s people through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, as we learn in verse 12, *“for when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.”* Here, then, we see the author’s main argument come into focus. The coming of Jesus Christ supercedes the Levitical priesthood established under the Sinai covenant. In fact, Jesus’ messianic ministry supercedes the entire Mosaic economy as the inferior and typological (Moses, the levitical priesthood, and law and its ceremonies) is replaced by the superior and the reality which is found only in Christ. If the author’s point holds, why then would anyone want to return to the inferior and the

types and shadows now that the reality has come? This is a very powerful argument and applies not only to the first century church receiving this letter, but to all of those in our own day and age who read the New Testament through an Israel-centered, and not a Christ-centered lens.

At this point the author reminds his hearers that Jesus himself does not trace his human ancestry from the tribe of Levi, because he came from the tribe of Judah. *“For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged 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.”* Since Jesus is not a Levite, his on-going priesthood then must be tied back to Melchizedek’s priesthood, a point which the author has established quite successfully.

But in pressing this point on to its logical conclusion, the author goes on to say in verses 15-17 that *“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.’”* Since not even death could conquer Jesus, nor frustrate his redemptive purposes, then his priesthood is grounded in the power of his indestructible life. This is why his priesthood is different from and superior to all those priests who have gone before. This explains why Jesus is not only a much superior priest than all his predecessors, it also explains why his priesthood is said to be eternal. Jesus lives forever!

It is vital to his overall case that at some point the author establish the fact that Judaism is rendered obsolete with the coming of Jesus Christ. So, he now explains why the Mosaic economy is no longer in force. In verses 18-19, he writes, *“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.”* The coming of Jesus Christ fulfilled the covenant promise that God made with Abraham (what we call the covenant of grace). And in doing so, the law is set aside (i.e., the Mosaic economy). The law is holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12), but since the human race has fallen in Adam, the law condemns us and gives us no power or ability to save ourselves. The law cannot make us perfect. But Jesus Christ can. Instead of condemnation, we now have hope, and because we have hope we are now to draw near to God in great confidence.

As we saw when we finished up the last half of chapter 6, the entire Christian faith and gospel promise stands or falls based upon the truth of God’s covenant oath which he himself swore upon the authority of his own name, because there is no higher authority. In verse 20, the author returns to that point, arguing that the better hope, *“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.’”*

As the author has been arguing, since Jesus Christ is superior to all things, and since God’s promise stands or falls based upon the person and work of Christ, then Christ’s priesthood is eternal and grounded in God’s own authority. No such promise was ever made regarding the Levitical priesthood. As the author simply puts it in verse 22, *“this makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.”* Jesus’ priesthood is eternal, its authority stems from God’s own oath, and it reflects Christ’s superiority to all things. Why then would anyone want to go back to Moses and the Old Covenant?

The author now points out the obvious difference between the priesthood of Jesus and that of the Levites. *“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.”* Jesus does have any human sinfulness or frailty. He has risen from the dead and lives 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." In every way Jesus' priestly work is superior to that of Israel's priests. He is not only the perfect priest, but he also holds the priesthood forever. And unlike Moses, Aaron, and the Levitical priesthood, Jesus can save to the uttermost. And because he was raised from the dead, Jesus lives to intercede for us, his people. He has none of the limitations of a sinful human priest.

This is exactly what the Old Testament has led the people of Israel to expect. As the author points out in the closing verses of the chapter, *"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."* Because Jesus is the perfect priest, who has once for all offered the perfect sacrifice (namely himself), and who holds the priesthood eternally, his priestly work takes away the guilt of our sin. Jesus has no need to sacrifice for himself since he with without sin. His sacrifice (himself) has no need to be repeated, because once made, it accomplishes everything necessary to render us perfect forever.

What should we take with us from the account of Melchizadek?

Because the church which originally received this epistle was struggling under the pressure of persecution from civil authorities, or from the synagogues many of them had left behind when they became followers of Jesus, the author of Hebrews gives this church a number of biblical and theological reasons explaining why Jesus is superior to all things, as well as explaining how the Old Testament foretold of Jesus' messianic ministry. If those in the church who were considering returning to Judaism would only stop and listen to the author's case as to why Melchizadek's priesthood was a type of Jesus' priesthood, then the folly of giving up on the superior and returning to the inferior becomes clear. Why go back to Moses, Aaron, the Levitical priesthood and the law, when all of these things, and these individuals pointed ahead to the saving work of Jesus Christ, including Jesus' superior priesthood?

That these professing Christians didn't care about these arguments was a great source of frustration to the author, but after warning the church of the severe consequences of giving up on the gospel and trusting in good works (apostasy), he presses ahead in chapter 7 explaining why Melchizadek is such an important figure in redemptive history and how Jesus' own priesthood derives from Mechizadek's. This doesn't mean that we should start naming our children after Melchizadek, but that we as Christians must see that everything Jesus does fulfills those Old Testament prophecies and types written of him. And Melchizadek is a major reason why those who read the Old Testament should see that Jesus is a priest forever after the order of Melchizadek. And because Jesus' priestly work fulfills God's promise, sworn on his oath, Jesus is therefore the guarantor of a better covenant.

Melchizadek's priesthood points us to a Savior who through his death and resurrection makes us perfect and saves us to the uttermost. Because the righteousness of our Savior is the ground of God's covenant promise, and he lives to make intercession for us without any weakness of a human priest, then we can say with boldness and confidence, "Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant." And if he is, how can we turn our backs on him and return to Judaism, or seek salvation through good works, obedience to the law, the performance of religious ceremonies or rituals? If Jesus is superior to all things, why return to the inferior? To do so is folly. It is to invoke the covenant curse. It is to reject God's declaration when he says to us, "Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant." And this is why the account of Melchizadek is so important.