

The Epistle to the Hebrews Session 4
A Priest “in the order of Melchizedek”

Hebrews 7

We have noted that our homilist consistently bases his exhortation on his interpretations of scripture, and that in particular he often uses one scriptural text to explain and expand on another. We have noted that our homilist frequently draws on the interpretive strategy of typology—finding in a figure in the Old Testament a foreshadowing of Jesus or of the first century Christian community to whom the author writes. Now, having introduced Melchizedek in his exposition of Psalm 110:4 our author expands on who this Melchizedek is by his interpretation of Genesis 14:17-20. Melchizedek, the early priest, is a type—a foreshadowing—of Jesus the true High Priest forever.

There is also a more negative use of contrast between the old covenant and the new. The old, inadequate priests of the order of Levi are contrasted with the new perfect priesthood of Christ. Again it is not clear whether our homilist is trying to persuade Christians of Jewish background of the superiority of their newfound faith or whether he draws on his extensive knowledge of the Old Testament as a rhetorical device to exhort them to a more persistent faith.

In this chapter the earlier exposition of the importance of God’s oath is expanded and deepened. The author complements the stress on Christ’s exalted priesthood with emerging attention to Christ as suffering priest.

Jewish interpreters of the figure of Melchizedek, such as the sectarians who wrote a text called *The Coming of Melchizedek*, 11Q, found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Philo, the Alexandrian philosopher, speculated on who this strange figure might have been. For the

sectarians, he seems to be a kind of angel; for Philo he is more a symbol of spiritual reality. We have no evidence that our author drew on any of this speculation about Melchizedek and then applied it to Jesus. Far more likely the preacher uses the figure of Jesus as the lens through which to view the story of Melchizedek. (Paul seems to do the same kind of thing when he reads the story of Abraham through the experience of Christian believers (Romans 4, Galatians 4) and views Adam's death through the lens of Christ's resurrection (1 Corinthians 15).

Who Was Melchizedek?: Hebrews 7:1-10

The brief text in Genesis 14:17-20 follows a narrative about Abraham, the story of that patriarch's routing of Chedorlaomer, the King of Elam, who had captured his nephew Lot. When Lot has been released he returns to his camp along with his kingly allies. The story continues:

“And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine: he was priest of God Most High. He blessed (Abraham) and said:

‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Maker of heaven and earth,
And blessed be God Most High,
Who has delivered your enemies into your hand’

“And Abraham gave him one tenth of everything.”

Our author then proceeds to tell his audience a good deal about Melchizedek, not based on any explicit description in Genesis but based on the interpretation of two Hebrew words and on Genesis' conspicuous silence about Melchizedek's origins and his fate.

We have already seen that the name “Melchizedek” probably has its origin in the very early claim “My king is Zedek,” where “Zedek” is the name of an old Canaanite deity, but our author finds a more imaginative and useful interpretation, paralleled in Philo. He takes the first part of the name and probably rightly derives it from the Hebrew *melek*. The second part of this mysterious figure’s name he derives from the Hebrew *tzedekah*, righteousness. As King of Righteousness, of course, Melchizedek becomes a type of the King of all righteousness, Jesus.

Genesis tells us that Melchizedek is King of Salem, and our author is not content to see Salem as an earthly kingdom. The word Salem is derived, he claims, from the Hebrew *Shalom*, the word used in Hebrew to this day as a greeting, a word that meant—and means—peace. Whether or not our author remembers that Isaiah has called the Messiah Prince of Peace or knows that Christians can claim that title for Jesus, in Melchizedek he sees the prototype of the true King of Peace.

Our author is not unique in assuming that what the Bible leaves out is left out for good reason. Here what the Bible leaves out is any indication of who Melchizedek’s father and mother were. This suggests that he had no parentage and therefore no beginning. What the Bible also leaves out is any account of Melchizedek’s death. This suggests that indeed he has not died. Put these two conspicuous silences together and we find our Melchizedek, “without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life.”

Then comes the obvious punch line, a reminder that our author probably did not start with the silence of Genesis 14 but with the affirmation of Psalm 110 to understand Melchizedek: “resembling the Son of God he remains a priest forever.”

In vv 4-10 we find an exposition of the fact that Abraham gave a tenth of his spoils, a tithe, to Melchizedek. From this fact Hebrews draws the conclusion that Melchizedek is superior

to Abraham—it is the inferior who pays tribute to the superior, of course. The King demands, the subject provides. More than that, it is Melchizedek who blesses Abraham, not Abraham who blesses Melchizedek. Here again it is the superior who blesses and the inferior who receives blessing (v 7). The conclusion is obvious: Melchizedek is greater than Abraham.

The next conclusion (vv 9–10) is perhaps slightly less obvious. The Levitical priests, the priests who have served at the temple in Jerusalem, are descendants of Abraham—the relatively inferior patriarch. Therefore, their priesthood is also inferior to the priesthood that is somehow associated with Melchizedek. And though Levi and his priests have for centuries received tithes from the children of Israel, back in Genesis 14, when Levi was still “in the loins” of his ancestor Abraham, he paid tithes to Melchizedek. “See how great he is!” (7:4). The “he” is Melchizedek, but of course “he” is Jesus too.

Law and Priesthood: Hebrews 7:11-19

Now our author makes two related claims.

- 1) With the coming of Jesus, the old priesthood (associated with Aaron and Levi) has passed away in favor of a new heavenly priesthood
- 2) With the coming of Jesus, the old law, tied to the old priesthood, has therefore also passed away in favor of a new law.

In the chapters that follow we will learn more both about the new High Priest and about the law under which Christians are to live.

We have in these verses another tricky exegetical argument. Jesus came from the tribe of Judah. Nowhere in the Old Testament does it indicate that any priest shall be appointed from the

tribe of Judah, so Jesus Christ—who obviously is now our priest—does not derive his priesthood from the traditional orders of Israel (but from Melchizedek).

Furthermore, the priests of the old order all died off, each in his own time. The new priest, because he is of the order of the eternal Melchizedek, described in Psalm 110:4 as a “priest forever,” is indestructible (v 16).

Finally the old law, associated with the old priesthood, has to pass away because it failed to do what was needed: “for the law made nothing perfect” (v 19). That law was literally hopeless because it provided no hope of perfection. The new law through Christ, who is the great perfecter, is the anchor of our hope. And because he alone provides access to God, he is our true priest.

God’s Oath about the High Priest: Hebrews 7:20-28

We have noted more than once that themes, motifs, and keywords appear and reappear throughout this homily like motifs in a symphony or images in a poem. We return now to the “oath,” a topic discussed in 6:13–18. We know that Christ’s priesthood is confirmed by an oath because Psalm 110 tells us that an oath goes with the priesthood of Melchizedek. We know that no oath accompanies the appointment of Levitical priests because no oath is ever mentioned in connection with their priesthood. Furthermore we know that there must be many Levitical priests, because such priests die off one by one and must be replaced (6:23). We rejoice that Jesus, appointed in Psalm 110, like his forerunner Melchizedek has neither beginning nor end of days. He is a priest forever. And therefore in Christ we need only one priest; no need for successors. How superior he is!

The preacher finally (vv 26–28) moves into an appropriately homiletical affirmation, which turns almost into a doxology. In the doxology we hear two great themes of this composition—one already established, the other to be developed more fully in the next chapters. The first theme is that Christ is the great priest enthroned in the heavens forever. The second theme, equally central to our author, is that he offers himself as sacrifice for the sins of others. By doing so he provides what the old priesthood and the old law could never provide—he is made perfect, a notion that we have already encountered at 5:9.

Peter Paul Rubens, Abraham Meets Melchizedek, painted around 1625



Questions:

1. The interpretation of the relationship of Jesus' to Melchizedek probably seems unduly imaginative to us, but can we see in the homilist's discussion claims and promises appropriate to our faith and hope in Jesus?
2. If Jesus is the great and only high priest how do we understand the priesthood of Christians today toward each other, both in relation to ordination and in relation to the ministry of all the people?
3. If Hebrews tells us that we are not bound by the old law found in the Old Testament, how do we understand law and obligation for our communities today?

Reading:

Gareth Lee Cockerill, "Melchizedek without Speculation: Hebrews 7:1-25 and Genesis 14:14-

24," in Richard Bauckham, et al, eds., *A Cloud of Witnesses: The Theology of Hebrews in Its Ancient Context* (LNTS 387; London T&T Clark, 2008) 128–44.

Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Melchizedek in the MT, LXX, and the NT," *Biblica* 81 (2000) 63-69.

Eric F. Mason, "Cosmology, Messianism, and Melchizedek: Apocalyptic Jewish Traditions and

Hebrews," in Eric F. Mason and Kevin B. McCrudden, *Reading the Epistle to the*

Hebrews: A Resource for Students (SBL Resources for Biblical Study; Atlanta: SBL, 2011) 53-76.