

The Pastor's Pen  
**Jesus and Melchizedek**  
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Genesis 14 gives the very brief account of the mysterious figure named Melchizedek. “And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said, ‘Blessed by Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed by God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!’ And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.” Psalm 110:4 is the only other place in the OT where Melchizedek is mentioned. “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.’”

The reader of the Psalm asks, “Who is the priest after the order of Melchizedek?” The answer is found in vs. 1, “The LORD says to my [David’s] Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” Jesus interpreted this verse as speaking about *himself* (Matt 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42-43). So did Peter (Acts 2:34). So did Paul (Eph 1:20). So does the book of Hebrews (Heb 1:13). So, Jesus is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. But what does this mean? By reading the Genesis account, we can see something of what it means.

*Jesus: True King of Jerusalem*

First, Melchizedek is the king of *Salem*. Now, Salem was the early name for *Jerusalem*. In Matthew 21, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey in fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your *king* is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Jesus is the True King of Jerusalem (having come from Judah rather than Melchizedek), of which Melchizedek was the first type (later types include David, Solomon, etc.). Melchizedek’s name means “king of Righteousness” (Heb 7:2) and this is surely a title for Jesus.

*Jesus: Victory Communion Meal*

Second, Melchizedek brings the victory supper of bread and wine out to Abram after a great battle. It always strikes me as curious that Jesus, the night before he gained final victory over sin, offers his disciples the same meal of bread and wine at the “Last Supper.” Melchizedek was the first to offer such a meal to someone lesser than himself. Jesus is the Last to do so, and he offers it to us “as often as you will.”

*Jesus as Priest of God Most High*

Third, Melchizedek was the priest of God Most High. (The compound name “God Most High” [*El ‘Elyon*] is only used here in Genesis 14, but it occurs four times!<sup>1</sup> The term is superlative, so it is something like God, the very highest God). Melchizedek served God as His priest in [Jeru]Salem. Hebrews picks up on this and it is very important in trying to understand the work of Jesus Christ as our Great High Priest.

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<sup>1</sup> El and ‘Elyon are both used many times, but always separately in the OT. Usually, ‘Elyon is used with the generic Elohim or the personal name Yahweh. So, El ‘Elyon seems to be peculiar to Melchizedek, probably because he was a different nationality than Abraham and the later Jews.

Throughout the OT, starting with Adam and Eve in the Garden, animal and other sacrifices were a part of everyday life. All Christians recognize that the sacrifices of animals have ceased. Sometimes I fear that we do not think about how wonderful this is, but we take it for granted and we forget just how bloody and horrific this practice actually was. (By the way, paganism eventually returns to the practice of sacrifice, be it fruit, animals, or people. This is what is coming down the pike as we speed towards paganism in the western world).

But why have animal sacrifices ceased? Do you have a legal explanation for this? Of course we know that the answer is because Jesus our Great High Priest has offered a sacrifice “once for all.” The sacrifice he offered was his own body. It is his blood rather than the blood of animals that appeases the wrath of God. For, Christ is the Lamb of God, slain before the foundation of the world. So Jesus is both priest and sacrifice.

But there is a real problem here, for in the OT God eventually took the priesthood through a single family line: the line of Aaron who was a Levite. But Jesus is *not a Levite*. You cannot just assume that Jesus can offer a sacrifice before God just because he feels like it. No. Jesus came as one born under law (Gal 4:4). He had to obey the Law of God perfectly. To offer a sacrifice without being from the correct genealogy would be blasphemy. Just ask Jeroboam who thought it would be expedient to create a new priesthood so that the Jews in the north would not have to go all the way to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices in another country (2 Kgs 12:31).

This is the reason Hebrews takes up the discussion of Melchizedek and Jesus. Maybe you are a mystic and have thought that the reason Melchizedek is mentioned is to tell us something incredible about Melchizedek, as if Hebrews is asserting something supernatural about Melchizedek. There is a popular view (as old as sect in Qumran c. 0 BC-AD) that Melchizedek is Jesus (see footnote for more on this Messianic view in the ancient world).<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 7:3 says that he was “without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life.” The thinking is that Melchizedek is Christ pre-incarnate.

There are serious flaws with this thinking. First, if this were the case, the Scripture would call Melchizedek God, as the Angel of the LORD is sometimes called in the OT (Gen 16:13; 22:15-18; Num 22:34; Josh 6:22). But Melchizedek is never called God. Second, Melchizedek was a man, not an angel (Heb 7:4, “*this man...*”). This is why he could serve God as priest. Angels are not priests. So, he is not the angel of the Lord. Third, Hebrews says that he *resembles* Jesus, not that he *is* Jesus. “But *resembling* the Son of God he continues a priest forever” (Heb 7:3). Fourth, history shows the bizarre places that thinking Melchizedek is

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<sup>2</sup> Qumran Cave 11 (Q11Q13II, 13) considered Melchizedek a heavenly Michael-like figure who would return during the last Jubilee to destroy Belial. Philo, the contemporary of Josephus, uses Platonic imagery to talk about Melchizedek as a symbol of the Logos (*Alleg. Interp.* 3:79-82). 2 Enoch is the most bizarre, claiming that Melchizedek was a miracle boy born before the flood at the incredible age of 3, to Noah’s recently deceased sister-in-law. He was born with a marked chest with a priestly seal. He is taken up into heaven (like Enoch) during the flood. He returns in the days of Abraham. And he will function as the end-time messianic priest (2 Enoch 71-72). See George H. Guthrie, “Hebrews,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale, and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), p. 967.

Messiah can take you (see n. 2). Fifth, and most importantly, this completely misses the point of bringing Melchizedek up in the book of Hebrews.

Melchizedek comes up in Hebrews to answer the question of how Jesus can do all of this incredible priestly work without being a Levite from Aaron's lineage. The answer: Jesus is a priest forever *in the order of Melchizedek* (Heb 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:15-17). How is Jesus in the lineage of Melchizedek? Because Melchizedek himself has no (recorded) genealogy. If he didn't need one to be High Priest, then Jesus doesn't need one either, if he is a priest from this Order. And Psalm 110:4 clearly says that God made Jesus after this Order.

So what is the big deal if Jesus is from the order of Melchizedek? There are two things to ponder here. First, Melchizedek was a greater priest than Levi (Aaron, Eleazar, Phinehas, Zadok or any other OT Jewish priest). How do we know? Because the mighty Abraham gave him a tithe of all he had (Gen 14:20; cf. Heb 7:2). It is as if Levi were himself paying a tithe to Melchizedek, which means that Melchizedek is greater than Levi (Heb 7:9). He was greater, not because he was some angelic-messianic figure, but because he came before Levi. Melchizedek was the priest of [Jeru]Salem long before Levi was even conceived. So, Jesus is greater than any Levitical priest.

Most people stop here, so that they do not make the connection between Jesus' Melchizedekian *priesthood* and his Levitical-Aaronic *obedience*. That is, they seem to assume that since Jesus is from a different priesthood that he doesn't have to (perhaps isn't *allowed* to) "fulfill" Levitical sacrificial and ceremonial laws. In other words, they miss the whole point of Hebrews 7. Is it any wonder that the book of Hebrews says that this stuff about Melchizedek is "hard to explain?"

So the second to think about is this. The whole reason Melchizedek comes up in Hebrews is precisely because Jesus *is* fulfilling *Levitical* covenantal laws, yet is not himself biologically descended from the tribe of Levi. There has to be an explanation for how Jesus could do this. The reason Jesus is able to fulfill the ceremonial and sacrificial law is (ironically) because he is *not* from the order of Aaron.

Aaronic priests could not perform the law perfectly which was the requirement. So Hebrews 7:11 says, "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?" Do you see? Another priesthood was needed in order to bring about fulfillment of the Aaronic priestly laws!

How does Jesus fulfill these laws? By making his offering in the *heavenly* sanctuary. "He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption... For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb 9:12, 24).

This is the reason why bloody sacrifices and sprinklings and the rest of it have ceased. They don't just go away. They are obeyed and thereby fulfilled in Christ who is our Great High Priest in the order of someone other than Levi. What is the implication/application?

The Scripture calls Christians a royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:9). The prophecy was that God would bring woman and Gentiles and unclean people into this new "Levitical priesthood" (Isa 66:19-21). This new priesthood does not serve in the old way of the law, but in the new way of the spirit. This is the point of Colossians 2, "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross" (Col. 2:13-14). We stand now as servant Levities of the Great High Priest. Priests born not of natural lineage, but of the Spirit. That is the reason why God tells us about the mysterious figure named Melchizedek.