

Hebrews 7:1-10
Genesis 14
Psalm 110

“The Order of Melchizedek”

March 7, 2021

Melchizedek is a curious fellow.

Lot, Abram’s nephew, was taken captive by Chedorlaomer,
and Abram came to his rescue.

And when Abram returned, the king of Sodom came to meet him,
and with him came this enigmatic figure, Melchizedek,
the king of Salem, and a priest of God Most High.

And Melchizedek brought bread and wine—for a covenant meal—
and blessed Abram, saying

“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.”

Then Melchizedek, king of Salem, disappears from the scene as quickly as he appeared,
and except for a reference to an “Adoni-Zedek” king of Jerusalem in Joshua 10,
(Melchizedek means King of Righteousness,
while Adoni-zedek means Lord of Righteousness)
there is no further trace of Melchizedek until you get to Psalm 110.

Psalm 110 speaks of the kingly rule of the Son of David.

Some thought that since the OT so clearly separates
the office of king from the office of priest
that Psalm 110 must refer to two different figures—
the royal king and his faithful high priest
(like king David and Zadok the high priest –
or like Zerubbabel the Davidic governor
and Joshua the high priest after the Exile).

But Psalm 110 does not speak of the Aaronic priesthood.

It speaks of a king who will also be a priest after the order of Melchizedek,
and Melchizedek was both King of Salem and a priest of God Most High.

David saw with the eyes of faith, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that Melchizedek
signaled the future of his own line.

Sing Psalm 110

Read Heb 6:13-7:10

Introduction: Genesis 14 and the Story of Melchizedek

Why should you care that Jesus was a priest according to the order of Melchizedek?

Because you need a priest that does not die.

Why do you need a priest at all?

Well, have you ever sinned?

Have you ever done something wrong?

God says that the wages of sin is death.

So if we have sinned, then the only way to pay for our own sins is to die!

And if you are dead – then you are... well, dead.

In other words, you need someone to offer a sacrifice on your behalf –

because without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins.

And this is where chapter 5 of Hebrews had started –

“For every high priest chosen from among men
is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God,
to offer gifts and sacrifices for sin.” (5:1)

There is something rooted in the human psyche that recognizes that *we have sinned* –
and we need some way of making it right.

And so God established the Levitical priesthood as a means of showing Israel
how all this works.

Of course, the problem (as we’ll see in the rest of Hebrews 7-10)

is that the Levitical priesthood can’t actually deal finally and fully with sin.

And at the heart of the problem is that the Levitical priests kept dying off.

Every generation there was a new high priest.

You need a priest who lives forever.

You need a priest who is a Son of God.

This is the central message of the Book of Hebrews.

In Jesus Christ, we see that the Son of God

has become the merciful and faithful High Priest.

In chapter 1 we heard that the Son is the radiance of the glory of God and the stamp of his nature.

He is the eternal Son of God.

He is also the eschatological Son of God – the *last days* Son of God.

He was Son from all eternity,

but he has also inherited the name of Son,

through his ascension to the right hand of the Father.

And as the eschatological Son he sits on the throne of his father, David,

at the right hand of God the Father,

ruling over all things.

Then chapter two explained that this eschatological Son
is not only the king who rules over all things,
but is also the merciful and faithful high priest
who makes propitiation for the sins of the people.
And in chapters 3-5 that statement was fleshed out,
as we saw that Jesus is faithful like Moses,
but also greater than Moses—
because Moses was faithful as a servant in the house,
but Jesus is faithful as a Son over the house.
Jesus is also a merciful high priest like Aaron,
but greater than Aaron—
because Aaron had to offer sacrifices for his own sins,
but Jesus was tempted in every way like us, yet without sin.

And then ch 5:8-10 set forth the theme for the rest of the book:

⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ¹⁰ being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

That last statement tantalized us.

Why Melchizedek?

But before explaining this,

Hebrews exhorted us against the dangers of apostasy.

The exhortations of chapters 6 and 10 bracket the central section of Hebrews.

There are those who partake of the blessings of the covenant
only partially and temporarily.

But as we saw last time, God's elect will never falter,

because he has confirmed the "unchangeable character of his purpose"

by his promise and his oath, so that "we who have fled for refuge

might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us."

And chapter six concludes with another tantalizing reference to the order of Melchizedek.

Now we are ready to see what this order is.

Here in chapters 7-10 Hebrews sets forth the central theme of the book.

Jesus, the Son of God, has brought about

a new priesthood, a new covenant, and a new sacrifice—

but not just a new priesthood, covenant and sacrifice—

but a *better* priesthood, a *better* covenant, and a *better* sacrifice.

In Hebrews 6:13-20 the focus was on God's promise and oath—
especially the oath that God swore to Abraham in Genesis 22,

after Abraham had believed God and offered his son Isaac on Mt Moriah. Not only has God promised to bless Abraham—and bless the nations through Abraham—but now God has sworn it by an oath.

And in Jesus God has brought to pass what he swore to Abraham.

1. The Order of Melchizedek (7:1-3)

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, ² 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. ³ 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.

Having tantalized us for the second time regarding Melchizedek, Hebrews finally explains how Melchizedek relates to his message.

He had cited the first part of Psalm 110 back in chapter 1—

“Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”—
but in chapter 5 he had introduced Psalm 110:4 which refers to the
“order of Melchizedek.”

Psalm 110 is a fascinating song.

If it weren't for Psalm 110, Genesis 14 might have stood simply
as a somewhat strange episode in the life of Abraham.

We read Genesis 14 earlier,

and we saw that this obscure event in the life of Abraham
reveals God's plan for the salvation of the human race.
There must be a priestly king who never dies.

This is the point of Hebrews 7:1-10.

The author of Hebrews looks back at Genesis 14 – through the eyes of Psalm 110 –
and says “Wow! That's what Jesus is all about!”

[[[Verses 1 and 10 both speak of the meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek, with a chiasm in between:

meeting (1a)

Blessing (1b)

Tithe (2)

The resemblance between Melchizedek and the Son of God (3)

The following verses explain these things in greater detail, but in reverse order:

Tithe (4-5)

Blessing (6-7)—including the superiority of Melchizedek to Levi

Meeting (10)]]]

Hebrews 7:1-3 is all one sentence in Greek.

The sentence is “For this Melchizedek...continues a priest forever.”

The first words of verse one and the last words of verse three are the main sentence.

Everything else is modifying “Melchizedek.”

Who Was Melchizedek?

Verses 1-2 simply remind us of the key points in the story.

Melchizedek met Abraham and blessed him,

and Abraham gave a tithe to Melchizedek.

Hebrews also reminds us that Melchizedek’s name means “king of righteousness,”

and that his title (king of Salem) means “king of peace.”

Verse three then highlights the most important point:

“Without father, without mother, without genealogy,

having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God,

he continues a priest forever.”

In the first century there was a lot of speculation about Melchizedek.

One of the Dead Sea Scrolls 11QMelch portrays Melchizedek as a heavenly figure who executes eschatological judgment upon Belial and his evil spirits.

The year of the final judgment was called the Year of Melchizedek

But there was no association of M. with the priesthood.

[[Philo also speaks of M, but does not connect him with a non-levitical priesthood.]]

Some rabbis argued that M was considered unworthy as a priest,

and so the priesthood was transferred to Abraham in Gen. 14.

They thought that the blessing of Abraham was the end of M’s priesthood,

as he transfers the priesthood to Abraham.

But that’s not how Hebrews sees Melchizedek!

He stays firmly rooted in the historical narrative of Genesis 14,

with the commentary of Psalm 110 in the background.

Some Christians have thought that Melchizedek was never born and never died.

But that is not what the terms “fatherless” or “motherless” mean.

A person is called “fatherless” in Greek, when his father is unknown.

We have a similar usage in English.

We say, “poor motherless child” when referring to an orphan.

No one thinks that the child literally had no mother!

Rather the mother is dead – or is absent for some other reason.

The point is that in the book of Genesis, everyone fits into the story somewhere.

The genealogies in Genesis 10 tell you where everyone fits–

everyone except Melchizedek.

Melchizedek comes out of nowhere and disappears whence he came.
Who was this “priest of God Most High” who ruled in Salem?
We don’t know.

But there is another reason to point out that he is without genealogy.

In Israel, how did you become a priest?
Did you go to seminary and study theology?
Did the king simply appoint his best friends?

No.

You became a priest because you were born a priest.
It was all about genealogy.

If you were descended from Aaron, then you would be a priest.
So the fact that Melchizedek has no genealogy gives him a unique status.
In fact the very phrase “order of Melchizedek” is somewhat ironic,
given the fact that the “order of Melchizedek” is an order of one.

But that’s the point!

Without Genealogy: A Unique Priest-King

The order of Melchizedek, by its very nature, can have only one member.
A priest in the order of Melchizedek can have no priestly genealogy.
If your son becomes a priest after you, then you are not in the order of Melchizedek!
This is especially poignant because the word translated “forever” (you are a priest forever)
is a dynastic word, suggesting an uninterrupted lineage
(Your priesthood will continue without interruption).

Some have suggested that Melchizedek was a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God.

But verse 3 does not lend itself at all to that view.

It says that he “resembles” the Son of God.
And more importantly, it says *how* he resembles the Son of God:
his priesthood has no end.

But note how Hebrews sets this up.
He doesn’t say that Jesus resembles Melchizedek!
No – other way around!
Melchizedek resembles Jesus.

You can only fully understand what Melchizedek is doing in Genesis 14
after you have seen the Son of God revealed in his full glory in Jesus.

So with our great high priest, Jesus, the Son of God, in view,
we are prepared to understand Genesis 14 better.

2. The Tithe and the Blessing (7:4-10)

⁴ See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! 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,^[a] though these also are descended from Abraham. ⁶ But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. ⁷ It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. ⁸ 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. ⁹ One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, ¹⁰ for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

Now Hebrews turns to look more closely at the tithe and the blessing in Genesis 14, in order to establish the superiority of Melchizedek to Levi.

The Lesser Pays Tithes to the Greater

Abraham the patriarch is the greatest man of the OT,
the father of nations and the heir of the promises.
But Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek.
Therefore Melchizedek must be greater than Abraham.
Likewise the Levitical priests were honorable and they received tithes from all Israel,
demonstrating their exalted status.
But while the Levites were exalted above their brothers in receiving the tithes from them,
nonetheless the Levites themselves paid tithes to Melchizedek
through their father, Abraham.

The Greater Blesses the Lesser

Not only that, but Melchizedek blessed Abraham.
And without dispute, the lesser is blessed by the greater.
Abraham had received the promises of God.
No one in all of the history of the OT was more favored by God than Abraham.
But Melchizedek blessed Abraham,
thereby demonstrating that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham.

Why does Hebrews say that M was superior to A?

Not on account of the promise—that was given to Abraham.

Nor on account of the covenant—that too was made with Abraham.

No, we must stick to the point.

M is superior to A simply and solely with respect to the priesthood.

Abraham is the father of the Levitical priesthood,

but the Levitical priesthood pays tithes to Melchizedek,

thereby demonstrating the superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood.

In short, Hebrews is saying that if you read Genesis 14 in the light of Psalm 110,

you get the surprising result that the Levitical priesthood must be replaced.

Why do I say surprising?

Because God made a covenant with Phineas, the grandson of Aaron,
saying that he would grant to his descendants a perpetual priesthood
(Num 25:12-13),
the same word that he used when he told David that he would
“establish his throne forever.”

Both are perpetual/eternal covenants.

Both use the same word—“olam” which means “forever” or “a long time.”

Why is the covenant with Phineas temporary, but the covenant with David eternal?

Or to ask it another way,
why was the Messiah from the tribe of Judah, but not from the tribe of Levi?

Because long before the covenant was made with Phineas,
back in the days of Abraham,

God had revealed a priesthood that was greater
than any that would come from Abraham.

In order for the final sacrifice to truly remove the sins of his people,
the sacrifice must have the power of an indestructible life.

In other words,
only the Creator could be the Redeemer.

Conclusion

There are a couple of applications to consider along the way:

One is the significance of “blessings.”

I used to be fairly indiscriminate in my use of blessings.

I would even bless my father.

But as I reflected on what Hebrews is saying about blessings,
I realized that a son does not bless his father *first*.

That’s backwards.

A blessing moves from the greater to the lesser –
and back again.

In many of the Psalms, you hear people “blessing the LORD.”

If the greater blesses the lesser – how can this be?

The reason is simple:

why can anyone “bless the LORD!” –
it’s because the LORD has first blessed us!

(Think of how God says it to Abraham:
“those who bless you will be blessed”).

A blessing from God starts a cycle of blessing –
which results in people blessing God!

The only time I could ever bless my father *first* was when I stand here
and bless him as a part of the congregation.

It is a part of my calling as your pastor to bless you.
This is more than a prayer.
When I give the benediction, I am not simply asking God to bless you,
I am declaring God’s blessing upon you.

I would encourage you parents to consider the biblical teaching on blessing,
and think about that in your blessing of your children.

We saw last time the importance of the “self-maledictory oath” –
when a person takes an oath, they call down curses on themselves
if they do not fulfill their oath.
The witness who does not tell the truth in court,
calls down the curse of the law upon himself if he lies under oath.
Likewise, when you get married you swear an oath before God
that you will be faithful to your marriage vows –
and thus you call down curses on yourself if you do not keep your oath!

In the same way, there are some things that should be reserved for a unique blessing
(think of Jacob’s blessing of his sons).

As parents, you are called to bless your children –
to speak “life-giving words” to them.

But secondly,
we also learn that the principle of tithing goes far deeper than the Mosaic law.

Notice how I said that.
The *principle* of tithing.

The OT economy doesn’t neatly translate into the modern world.
In the OT, the tithe was an agricultural tax
(or, in Genesis 14 – the tribute of the spoils of war!).
The tithe paid to the priest was 10% of the increase –
a tenth of produce and of the flocks and herds.

This meant that day-laborers did not pay a tithe.
The landowner paid the tithe.

(And in Abraham's case, Abraham paid the tithe to Melchizedek –
only after that would Abraham pay his own soldiers).

If you tried to reproduce that in the modern world,
then corporations would pay tithes –
while their employees wouldn't tithe,
because employees are paid "post tithe" you might say.

Of course, corporations do *not* tithe (and it would be very strange if they did!),

So we shouldn't expect to reproduce the OT tithe in the church today,
but the point in Hebrews is that if Christ is the great high priest
after the order of Melchizedek,
and Christ is *our* great high priest –
then we stand in relation to Jesus,
where Abraham stood in relation to Melchizedek.

This is why in the Presbyterian church, the pastor also pays tithes and offerings –
because all Christians stand in the same relation to Christ:
Christ is the Melchizedek – and we are Abraham's offspring by faith.

Both tithing and blessing are spoken of in a way that draws our attention beyond themselves
to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Melchizedek, after all, is superior to Abraham and Levi
only because he resembles Jesus.

He resembles the Son of God.

And he resembles the Son of God precisely because he has neither
beginning of days nor end of life.

Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, and sits now at the right hand of the Father.
He has offered that perfect sacrifice that has removed our sin and brought us near to God.