

Trinity College of the Bible

**The Inferior is Blessed by the Superior**

Main Assignment

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NT 318: Readings in the General Epistles

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*Melchizedek*

The Book of Hebrews was written by an anonymous source who had a profound understanding of both the Mosaic Law and the New Covenant that was established by Jesus Christ. Although Hebrews' author may never be identified, he had a clear message to convey to his weary recipients: in every aspect, Jesus is better! Do not fall away! He establishes Christ's superiority at every turn, reminding his audience that, "he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to him, since he always lives to make intercession for them."<sup>1</sup> However, Jesus can only live forever and be an eternal intercessor because he is "the guarantor of a better covenant."<sup>2</sup> Throughout Hebrews 7, the author makes this case by methodically comparing the priesthoods of the Levites and Melchizedek.

While the author's intended audience is debated by scholars, it is apparent that the letter's recipients met the following criteria based on its contents: they were followers of Christ who practiced and believed his teachings while simultaneously having a thorough, deep-seated knowledge of the Old Testament writings. Although some of them may have been Gentile converts, the vast majority were Jewish Christians. Therefore, the historical account of Abraham's interaction with Melchizedek didn't require the Hebrews' author to provide a detailed retelling of events. Instead, he focused on the spiritual significance of their encounter by revealing Melchizedek's superiority to both the Levitical Priesthood and Abraham, whom the Jews held in high esteem. It was imperative that the author convince his recipients of Melchizedek's superiority because "if it could be shown that Melchizedek was superior to Abraham, then it would be easy to demonstrate the superiority of Christ as a priest to all who descended from Abraham."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible (esv)* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2016), 1495.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1495.

<sup>3</sup> Gareth L. Reese, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Moberly, Missouri: Scripture Exposition Books, 1992), 106.

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The author of Hebrews begins to make his case at the beginning of chapter 7:

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. 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. See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils!<sup>4</sup> (Hebrews 7:1-4)

In this passage, the author undeniably establishes Melchizedek as a foreshadowing of Christ and his eternal priesthood, already displaying the inferiority of Abraham and the Levitical Priesthood. However, Abraham's high regard is warranted because of his closeness to God. Many who came to know him revered him and were in awe of God's divine influence over his life. Because of God's grace and Abraham's incredible faith, God gave him great wealth and protected him in addition to fulfilling all of his promises. From Abraham, all of Israel came into existence, including the Levites, who were given charge of the priesthood. Yet even in his greatness, Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham. According to Gareth Reese:

Abraham was a great man indeed, to his neighbors he was a "prince of God" and God Himself called Abraham "my friend," but in the account of Abraham's meeting with Melchizedek, it is Melchizedek who appears as the greater of the two. That greatness is implicit in the fact that Abraham gave the tithe to Melchizedek.<sup>5</sup>

However, Melchizedek's superiority isn't limited to the titles bestowed on him or the positions he held. Regarding Melchizedek's lack of family lineage, record of birth, or record of death outlined in verse 3, R.C.H. Lenski says:

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<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible (esv)*, 1494.

<sup>5</sup> Gareth L. Reese, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 106.

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“Without father,” etc., means that the Scriptures completely ignore his descent. Melchizedek did *not* inherit, nor did he transmit his priesthood, royal though it was. It depended on no connection backward or forward but inhered in his person alone; it was wholly independent of any connection save that with God. The old genealogical records were kept very meticulously, but Melchizedek’s name and his line are found in none of them. He appears, he vanishes—that is all. Yet Abraham bows to his priesthood, Abraham, in whom all the nations were to be blessed.<sup>6</sup>

Like Abraham, Melchizedek was a man chosen by God. However, many believe that scripture infers that Melchizedek was superior because he was a physical manifestation of the pre-incarnate Christ, or a “logophany.”<sup>7</sup>

Remember that Melchizedek is introduced without genealogy and without reference to his birth or death (Hebrews 7:3). This is key. In the ancient world, the legitimacy of a man’s priesthood depended on his genealogy. The author’s omission of Melchizedek’s genealogy implies that Melchizedek did not obtain his priesthood because of his ancestry. Rather, he was literally “made to resemble (Greek: *aphomoiomenos*) the Son of God, in that he remains a priest forever.” Jesus’ priesthood is not determined by his ancestry. And Jesus holds his priesthood permanently because “he continues forever (Hebrews 7:11-28).”<sup>8</sup>

Regardless of one’s opinion on this matter, the author of Hebrews ultimately states: “But this man who does not have descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.”<sup>9</sup>

In comparison, to be a priest under the Levitical Priesthood, one had to adhere to *strict* guidelines. Each priest had to be a male descendant of Aaron (Exodus 28:1) between the ages of 30-50 (Numbers 4:3) with documented lineage. While they were required to marry, they could

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<sup>6</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle James* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2001), 213.

<sup>7</sup> A term invented and used by Doc McDonald, brother to the writer of this paper. Invented to describe this particular incidence with Melchizedek in the Genesis account.

<sup>8</sup> Shara Drimalla & BibleProject Team, “Abraham, Melchizedek, and Jesus: How a Mysterious Royal Priest Points to Jesus,” from The Bible Project, accessed December 9, 2023, [https://bibleproject.com/articles/abraham-melchizedek-jesus/?gclid=Cj0KCQiA7OqrBhD9ARIsAK3UXh0o5cJaiUlykd2HAOb68D8BITLHaIhkM7mKGSE16hTqUU2ytQX\\_jicaAun1EALw\\_wcB](https://bibleproject.com/articles/abraham-melchizedek-jesus/?gclid=Cj0KCQiA7OqrBhD9ARIsAK3UXh0o5cJaiUlykd2HAOb68D8BITLHaIhkM7mKGSE16hTqUU2ytQX_jicaAun1EALw_wcB).

<sup>9</sup> *The Holy Bible (esv)*, 1494.

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not be married to a woman who was widowed by anyone other than a priest (Ezekiel 44:22). Nor could they marry a divorced woman or a woman prone to promiscuity (Leviticus 21:9, 14). The only two priests in recorded history who did not meet this criterion were Melchizedek and Christ.

In addition, the individual priests were mortal and the Levitical Priesthood was not intended to last. According to Jack Cottrell:

All OT priests were only temporary “because they were prevented by death from continuing, but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently” (Heb 7:23-24). This is why “He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb 7:25).<sup>10</sup>

The ascension of Christ was the defining moment that caused a schism for the Jews. Many did not comprehend or accept that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. Therefore, their loyalty to the Temple System and the Levitical Priesthood remained until the destruction of the temple under Titus Flavius Vespasianus,<sup>11</sup> when they were given no choice but to cease.

By refusing to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Messiah, the Jewish non-believers lived as if they existed in an alternate reality of sorts, and still live under such conditions today. However, by way of divine revelation from God, David’s Psalm regarding Melchizedek<sup>12</sup> brought to light the need for a new priesthood, an eternal one. In addition, several prophecies concerning the Messiah and his eternal priesthood were recorded hundreds of years prior, such as echoing David’s prophecy:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up from David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our

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<sup>10</sup> Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 2002), 277.

<sup>11</sup> Gary M. Burge, Lynn H. Cohick, Gene L. Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament within its Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2009), 49.

<sup>12</sup> *The Holy Bible (esv)*, 743-744.

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righteousness.’ “For thus says the LORD: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to make sacrifices forever.”<sup>13</sup>

The author of Hebrews perfectly conveys that Jesus Christ is the only one who could have fulfilled this need, despite the denial of his own people. He makes note that if perfection were obtainable through the Levitical Priesthood, then there wouldn’t have been a need for a new priesthood.<sup>14</sup> Lenski provides the following commentary:

So a Jew might in truth exalt the Jewish priesthood. Where in all the world was there a priesthood that was graced thus, fortified thus by a system of legal enactments that had been made by God himself? The readers of our epistle seem to have had such thoughts when they were inclined toward Judaism. Here is their answer: if this Levitical priesthood, which is supported by all this law, was, indeed, the means for competition so that nothing more needed to be provided for, what need was there for God to arrange for an altogether different kind of priest as he did in Ps. 110?<sup>15</sup>

Salvation and eternal life hang on this stark difference: while the Levitical Priesthood was comprised of finite, sinful, imperfect human beings, Christ “became a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life.”<sup>16</sup> Jesus Christ is the only person who could have instituted a new and better covenant and joined the Order of Melchizedek because of all that he accomplished while he was fully God and fully man. While his deity made his life indestructible, he chose to practice perfect obedience as a human. He is “holy, innocent, unstained, and separated from sinners.”<sup>17</sup> Unlike the Levitical priests, he

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 990.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1494.

<sup>15</sup> R.C.H. Lenski, *Commentary on the New Testament: The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle James*, 223.

<sup>16</sup> *The Holy Bible (esv)*, 1494-1495.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1495.

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does not have to offer up sacrifices daily to atone for sin because “he did this once for all when he offered up himself.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 1495.

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