

HEBREWS 7:1 – 8:13

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2. The superiority of Melchizedek (7:1-10)

For this Melchizedek -- king of Salem, priest of the most high God, who met Abraham [as he was] returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, ²with whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth of all [the spoils], [his name] first being translated king of righteousness and then also king of Salem, which means king of peace, ³[being] fatherless, motherless, without genealogy, having neither a beginning of days nor an end of life but having been made to resemble the Son of God -- remains a priest perpetually.

⁴Now see how great this one [was], to whom [even] the patriarch Abraham gave a tenth from the spoils. ⁵And those of the sons of Levi, who received a priestly office, have a command to collect a tenth from the people according to the law, that is [from] their brothers, even though [they] have come from the loin of Abraham. ⁶But the one not having his descent from them has collected a tenth [from] Abraham and has blessed the one having the promises. ⁷And without any dispute, the lesser is blessed by the greater. ⁸And here, on one hand, men who die receive a tenth; there, on the other hand, one of whom it is testified that he lives [receives it]. ⁹And, so to speak, even Levi, the one receiving a tenth, has paid a tenth through Abraham. ¹⁰For he was yet in the loin of [his] father when Melchizedek met him.

a. An exposition on Melchizedek (7:1-3)

(1) Genesis 14 tells how certain kings from the east defeated a confederation of local kings, plundered their cities, and took captives, including Abraham's nephew Lot. Abraham pursued those invading kings, defeated them, and recovered the property and people they had taken, including Lot.

(2) After Abraham's return, he was met by Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of the most high God (and also the King of Sodom whom the writer of Hebrews does not mention). Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and Abraham gave Melchizedek a tenth of all, probably meaning a tenth of all the spoils.

(3) He says that the name Melchizedek means "king of righteousness" and that the name Salem means "peace," which makes Melchizedek also the "king of peace." Guthrie writes (p. 253), "These concepts of righteousness and peace

are appropriate for one who prefigures the Messiah, who would make righteousness and peace possible for the people of God."

(4) The nature of Melchizedek

(a) Melchizedek is a very puzzling figure. Other than Hebrews, he is mentioned only in Gen. 14:18-20 and Ps. 110:4. He clearly serves as a type of Christ, as a type of perpetual, non-Levitical priest, but there is a question about the basis on which he functions as a type. Is he a mortal man who prefigures Christ because of how God chose to cast him in Scripture or is he a heavenly being of some sort who prefigures Christ because he is in fact an eternal priest?

(b) Many are convinced that Melchizedek is a mere mortal whom God casts or presents as a type of Christ by what he chose *not* to say about him.

[1] God provided no information in Scripture about Melchizedek's ancestry or his birth, and since one could qualify as a Levitical priest only by establishing proper parentage, God's silence on the matter communicates his intent that Melchizedek serve as a *type* of non-Levitical priest (regardless of his actual parentage). Likewise, his silence about Melchizedek's death indicates God's intent that Melchizedek serve as a *type* of eternal priest (regardless of his actual mortality). Under this view, Melchizedek does not resemble the Son of God in fact but *was made* to resemble him (v. 3), made a type or picture of a perpetual, non-Levitical priest, by the things God chose not to say about him in Scripture.

[2] What Melchizedek foreshadows as a type, Jesus fulfills as the reality. He is a symbol or representation of the coming eternal, non-Levitical priest not an eternal priest himself. He "remains" a priest forever only as a type, only as a representation of the coming Christ who is an eternal priest in fact. As Koester (p. 349) puts it, "Melchizedek died centuries before Christ and remains forever only as a foreshadowing of Christ." Victor Pfitzner states in *Hebrews*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) 107, "A new priesthood was first prefigured in the person of Melchizedek, then promised by God's solemn oath (6:17-20), and finally inaugurated with the enthronement of the Son as heavenly High Priest (5:5, 9-10; 6:20)."

[3] F. F. Bruce is an example of those who see Melchizedek as a mortal who is cast by God as a type of Christ. He writes (p. 136-138):

The words which follow present an outstanding example of the argument from silence in a typological setting. When Melchizedek is described as being "without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life", it is not suggested that he was a biological anomaly, or an angel in human guise. Historically

Melchizedek appears to have belonged to a dynasty of priest-kings in which he had both predecessors and successors. If this point had been put to our author, he would have agreed at once, no doubt; but this consideration was foreign to his purpose. The important consideration was the account of Melchizedek in holy writ; to him the silences of Scripture were as much due to divine inspiration as were its statements. In the only record which Scripture provides of Melchizedek – Gen. 14:18-20 – nothing is said of parentage, nothing is said of ancestry or progeny, nothing is said of his birth, nothing is said of his death. He appears as a living man, king of Salem and priest of God Most High; and as such he disappears. In all this – in the silences as well as in the statements – he is a fitting type of Christ.

[4] I don't think the fact God uses Melchizedek as a *type* of eternal priest when Melchizedek is not in fact an eternal priest means that God is testifying falsely about Melchizedek. The Hebrew writer seems to understand that God's silence about Melchizedek's ancestry, birth, and death was a technique for presenting him as a type, a method by which he was "*made* to resemble the Son of God" (v. 3) typologically rather than actually. The statement in v. 7 that it is "testified" that he lives also may point in the same direction. In saying it is "testified" that he lives rather than simply saying "he lives" the writer seems to be focusing on how God through his silence *portrayed* Melchizedek in Scripture. As Harold Attridge notes in *Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989) 191, the author "would appear, like Philo, to be uninterested in the person of Melchizedek himself and only concerned with what he represents."

(c) Others are convinced that Melchizedek is some sort of heavenly being who is actually, rather than merely typologically, an eternal priest.

[1] For example, Attridge writes (p. 191-192):

It seems likely, then, that his exposition of Gen 14 is not simply an application to a figure of the Old Testament of attributes proper to Christ, but is based upon contemporary speculation about the figure of Melchizedek as a divine or heavenly being. While lack of parentage, genealogy, and temporal limits are predicated of Melchizedek to evoke the character of the true High Priest, they are qualities probably applicable to the ancient priest as the author knew him.

[2] What gives me pause about this view is the uncertainty of how Melchizedek being a literal eternal priest relates to Christ's eternal priesthood. As Victor Pfitzner notes in *Hebrews*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997) 105, "A reading of Heb. 7:3, which turns Melchizedek into a suprahuman figure, runs counter to the Letter's stress on the uniqueness of Christ." Likewise, Bruce Demarest objects (quoted in Lane, 165) that

under this view Melchizedek would appear "as a supra-human figure whose priesthood would encroach upon the eternal priesthood of Christ."

[3] Moreover, it seems Melchizedek cannot be a preincarnate manifestation of Christ because he is distinguished from the Son of God by the author's statement that he is "made *to resemble* the Son of God." The idea of him being an angel who literally serves eternally as a priest doesn't fit very well, if at all, with the author's stress on Christ's superiority to the angels and his indication in 5:1 that priests (at least high priests) were taken from among humans. Jesus is a real human (though also God) not merely one who *appears* to be a human.

b. The greatness of Melchizedek (7:4-10)

(1) The author makes the point that Melchizedek's priesthood is greater than the Levitical priesthood because the Levitical priesthood traces its ancestry to Abraham and Melchizedek was greater than Abraham. Since this priest was greater than the ancestor of the Levitical priests, his priesthood is greater than theirs.

(2) That Melchizedek was greater than Abraham is shown by the fact Abraham paid a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek, after which Melchizedek blessed him. In paying a tenth to Melchizedek, Abraham indicated his deference or subordination to him, and since Abraham is the ancestor of the Levites, there is a sense in which the Levites also were making that payment and thus expressing deference or subordination.

(3) Abraham's paying the tithe to Melchizedek is such clear evidence of Melchizedek's superiority that the writer can say there is no dispute that in this instance the lesser was blessed by the greater. He's not stating a general maxim that blessings are given only by the greater to the lesser because there are clear instances in Scripture where inferiors bless superiors. For example, servants or the people sometimes blessed a king (2 Sam. 14:22; 1 Ki. 1:47, 8:66). Indeed, in Genesis 14 Melchizedek blesses God immediately after blessing Abraham (see also, Deut. 8:10; Ps. 16:7, 26:12, 34:1, 66:8).

(4) The author also notes Melchizedek's superiority to the Levitical priests because, unlike them, he is presented in Scripture as one who did not die.

3. The superiority of our eternal, Melchizedekian high priest (7:11-28)

¹¹Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood – for concerning it the people have been given Law – what further need for another priest to arise, [one] named according to the order of Melchizedek and not according to the order of Aaron? ¹²For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity a change of the law also occurs. ¹³For [the one] about whom these things are said belonged to another tribe, from which no one has served at the altar. ¹⁴For [it is] evident

that our Lord descended from Judah, about which tribe Moses said nothing concerning priests. ¹⁵And it is much more obvious still if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek, ¹⁶who has become [a priest] not according to a law of physical order but according to [the] power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷For it is testified [about him], "You [are] a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." ¹⁸For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹(for the law perfected nothing); on the other hand, [there is] the introduction of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.

²⁰And in so far as [it was] not without an oath (for those who became priests are without an oath, ²¹but this one [became a priest] through the one saying to him, "[The] Lord swore, and he will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever'"), ²²so far Jesus [also] has become a guarantee of a better covenant. ²³And, on the one hand, the priests have become many because they were prevented by death from remaining in office, ²⁴but on the other hand, because he continues forever, he has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵And so he is able also to save absolutely those who come to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

²⁶For such a high priest was indeed fitting for us, [one who is] holy, innocent, undefiled, having been separated from the sinners and having become higher [than] the heavens, ²⁷who does not have a necessity, as the [other] high priests, to offer up daily a sacrifice, first for his own sins [and] then for the sins of the people; for this one did [this] once when he offered up himself. ²⁸For the law appoints as high priests men who have weaknesses, but the word of the oath that came after the law [appoints] [the] son who has been made perfect forever.

a. The rules have changed (7:11-19)

(1) If "perfection" in the sense of completion or fulfillment of God's eternal purpose could be attained through the Levitical priesthood, which priesthood was bound to the law that defined and regulated it, there would be no need for a new order of priesthood. Put differently, it is because God's ultimate goal could not be established through the Levitical priesthood that there was a need for the different kind of priest promised in Ps. 110:4, one in the order of Melchizedek rather than in the order of Aaron.

(2) And when the priesthood is changed, as it was with Jesus, the law also changes because the law's requirements governing the old priesthood necessarily are superseded in the appointment of the new priest who does not meet those requirements.

(3) The law was changed in the case of Christ's appointment to the priesthood because he descended from the tribe of Judah and the priestly requirements given by Moses made no allowance for descendants of Judah to serve as priests. The change in law associated with Christ's priesthood is all the more evident by the fact Jesus is a priest like Melchizedek in the sense he is immortal (as is Melchizedek typologically), a circumstance for which the regulations of Levitical priests make no provision.

(4) So the introduction of the new priesthood in Christ results, on the one hand, in a setting aside of the Mosaic law which was weak and useless in the sense it did not perfect anything, that is, it did not complete or fulfill God's eternal purpose. That was not its designed role; it was temporary and provisional. On the other hand, the introduction of the new priesthood in Christ brings a better hope, a hope through which we draw near to God.

b. The power of a divine oath (7:20-22)

(1) Unlike the Levitical priests, Jesus' call to the priesthood includes an irrevocable oath that his priesthood will last forever (Ps. 110:4), which means he has become a guarantee of a better covenant.

(2) Guthrie writes (p. 267): "In the present context the author pictures Jesus as the one who guarantees God's covenant promises. The hearers, as new covenant people, have a covenant that is 'better' because, by virtue of God's oath, Jesus, the mediator of that covenant (cf. 8:6), holds an unalterable position. Our hope, therefore, rests on the most secure of terms."

c. The permanent priest (7:23-25)

(1) Whereas mortality keeps the Levitical priests from remaining in office, which is why there have been so many of them since Aaron, Jesus has a permanent priesthood because he is immortal. In the words of Rom. 6:9, "death no longer has mastery over him." He will never hand the high priesthood over to someone else, someone who might be unreliable in his discharge of it.

(2) And because his priesthood is permanent he is able to save fully (or for all time) those who come to God through him since he's always there to make intercession for them. This brings to mind Paul's statement in Rom. 8:31-34 (NIV):

³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

d. A summary and transition (7:26-28)

(1) These verses sum up the discussion of the Son's appointment as a superior high priest that began in 5:1 (and was interrupted by the hortatory interjection from 5:11 – 6:20). Jesus is the kind of high priest we need, one with a character and status greater than that of earthly priests. Unlike the earthly priests, he is sinless and has no need to offer sacrifices for his own sin. Rather, he offers himself as a sacrifice for the sins of others.

(a) The reference in v. 27 to "daily" sacrifices of high priests for their own sin and then for the sins of the people raises a question because this double sacrifice was specified for the high priest only on the annual Day of Atonement.

(b) The answer seems to lie in the fact that on many occasions during the year the high priest involved himself with the other priests as they officiated, including the week preceding the Day of Atonement. Josephus mentions this (*Jewish War* 5.231), and Philo suggests that the high priest offered sacrifices daily. Neil Lightfoot states in *Jesus Christ Today: A Commentary on the Book of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 148:

Josephus relates that on many occasions during the year the high priest involved himself with the other priests as they officiated – on the days of weekly sabbath, of new moon, of national festivals and annual gatherings of all the people. The law instructed the priest that if he committed "sins unwittingly in any of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done," he was to offer a young, unblemished bull to the Lord for a sin offering (Lev. 4:2-3). . . . Remembering other super-precautions of the Jews to avoid sin, it is probably correct to say that the later high priests *did* make daily offerings, just as the author says. Philo is in agreement, describing the high priest as one who "day by day offers prayers and sacrifices" for the people.

(2) And unlike the earthly priests whose ministry is confined to the earthly tabernacle, Jesus ministers in heaven itself where he sits at the right hand of God. This point is emphasized in the next two verses.

(3) "The old priests were appointed by virtue of the law but were weak (i.e., sinful, 5:2; mortal, 7:23), but the Son was appointed by God's oath and has been 'made perfect forever'" (Guthrie, 269). Regarding his having been "made perfect forever," Hagner comments (p. 114-115), "Thus, the Son, having accomplished his once-and-for-all sacrifice, has brought God's saving purposes, as well as his own personal calling, to their goal, all of which produces a state of completion and permanence – this is in contrast to the law (7:19) that could bring nothing to this stage of completeness and fulfillment."

C. Transition: We have such a high priest, who is a minister in heaven (8:1-2)

Now [the] main point of the things being said [is this]: we have such a high priest who sat down at [the] right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, ²a minister of the sanctuary, of the true tabernacle, which the Lord, not man, put up.

1. The main point of what he is saying is that Christians have the kind of high priest he has described, one who is sinless, eternal, sympathetic, and was appointed by an oath.

2. And this high priest, Jesus Christ, ministers not in an earthy sanctuary but in heaven itself where he sits at the right hand of God. He ministers in the true sanctuary in the sense it is "the only one which is not an imitation of something better than itself" (Bruce, 163). It is the reality that is reflected in the earthly tabernacle.

D. The superior offering of the appointed high priest (8:3-10:18)

1. Introduction: The more excellent ministry of the heavenly high priest (8:3-6)

³For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so [it was] necessary for this one also to have something which he might offer. ⁴Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the law, ⁵who minister in a copy and a shadow of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned when he intended to complete the tabernacle, for He says, "See that you will make it according to all the pattern that was shown to you on the mountain." ⁶But now he has obtained a superior ministry, in as much as he also is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted upon better promises.

a. Since every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices, Jesus, being a high priest, also must have something to offer. His offering was specified in 7:27: he offered *himself* once for all as a sacrifice for sin. Koester remarks (p. 382-383), "The fact that Jesus sat down (8:1) shows that the need for sacrifice has ended (10:11-18), although Christ's intercession on behalf of others continues."

b. If Jesus were on earth, he would not be a priest. The reason is that the high priestly ministry of the new covenant is conducted in heaven itself rather than in an earthly tabernacle that is a copy of the heavenly reality. So if Jesus were on earth, the new covenant would not be in effect, in which event Jesus could not serve as a priest because the Mosaic law permits only descendants of Aaron to be priests. The Levitical priesthood serving in a structure that is part of this passing realm points to Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary.

c. Jesus has obtained a heavenly ministry that is superior to that conducted by the Levitical priests in conjunction with the fact he is the mediator of a better covenant that was enacted or founded on better promises. He elaborates on this new covenant in the following verses.

2. The superiority of the new covenant (8:7-13)

⁷For if that first covenant was faultless, a place [for] a second would not have been sought. ⁸For finding fault [with] them, he says:

Look, days are coming, says [the] Lord, and I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ⁹not like the covenant I made with their fathers on the day I took their hand to lead them from the land of Egypt, for they did not continue in my covenant, and I had no concern for them, says the Lord. ¹⁰For this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their mind and write them upon their hearts. And I will be God to them, and they will be a people to me. ¹¹And they shall not teach, each one his fellow citizen and each one his brother, saying "Know the Lord," for all will know me, from the least to the greatest of them. ¹²For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will not remember their sins any longer.

¹³When he says "new," he has made the first obsolete, and what is becoming obsolete and is becoming old is on the verge of disappearance.

a. The superiority of the new covenant is evident in the fact there would have been no need for God to announce in Jeremiah's day the coming of a new covenant if the first covenant, meaning the Mosaic covenant established at Sinai (v. 9), had been sufficient for achieving God's ultimate purpose.

b. As v. 13 makes clear, the key for the author in the Jeremiah text is the use of the word "new" to describe the covenant God was going to establish. By calling that covenant "new" God indicated that the Mosaic covenant, with its mandated priesthood and sacrifices, was destined for obsolescence. It was something transitory that would be replaced. What is in that category, what has been destined by God for obsolescence, is expiring and thus is on the brink of disappearing, however long it may totter there.

(1) As Attridge states (p. 229), "In Hebrews's eyes, the old covenant was near its end as soon as the oracle of a new was spoken." Bruce says (p. 179) "that by predicting the inauguration of a new covenant Jeremiah in effect announced

the impending dissolution of the old order." Pfitzner says (p. 122), "[T]he Sinai covenant was antiquated ("growing old") from the moment that the promise of Jer 31 was uttered."

(2) We know from what the author has already written that the old covenant in fact passed away in the crucifixion, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ (7:18-22, 8:6). This is confirmed in numerous other places in the New Testament (e.g., 2 Cor. 3:5-6; Gal. 4:21 – 5:1). Indeed, the writer of Hebrews has stressed the fact that Jesus is serving as the great High Priest under this new covenant.

c. The new covenant is made with the "house of Israel" (v. 10), which in v. 8 is described in terms of the divided monarchy. The church, of course, is Jewish at its root. The apostles and the first Christians were true Israel, meaning they were ethnic Jews who also shared the faith of Abraham in that they believed God's testimony about his Son Jesus Christ.

(1) That's almost certainly why Jesus chose 12 apostles; they signified the righteous remnant, the faithful subset of the twelve tribes of Israel. As Robert Stein notes in *Jesus the Messiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996) 114, "The symbolic nature of their number was not accidental. Jesus' audience could not have helped but notice the number. 'Twelve' conjured up in the mind of any Jew the twelve tribes of Israel."

(2) As Paul explains in Rom. 11:17-24, Israel is the olive tree into which Gentiles have been grafted. The faith by which we enter into the new covenant is the faith that marks us as children of Abraham (e.g., Rom. 4:11-12, 9:6-8; Gal. 3:7-9, 3:29). Similarly, he says in Eph. 2:11-13 that Gentiles, who once were alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

(3) Paul almost certainly refers to the church as "the Israel of God" in Gal. 6:16, and in Phil. 3:3 he says "it is we who are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God."

d. Aspects of the new covenant

(1) Unlike the Mosaic covenant which the Israelites broke, those in the new covenant will have God's laws put in their minds and written on their hearts.

(a) What I think this means is that all members of the new covenant will have the indwelling Spirit and by virtue of his transforming work have a greater desire and ability to obey the will of God. We will be more internally motivated and empowered to live godly lives than were those under the Mosaic covenant, generally speaking.

(b) For example, Paul writes in Rom. 8:9, 12-13:

⁹But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, this one is not of him. . . . ¹²Now, therefore, brothers, we are debtors not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh, ¹³for if you live according to the flesh, you are going to die; **but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the practices of the body**, you will live.

(c) Paul says in 2 Cor. 3:1-3 that the Corinthians' existence as a group of Christians is his letter of recommendation, a letter authored by Christ himself but brought into being through the agency of the apostle (just like one who writes what is dictated). Christ used Paul to write Paul's own letter of recommendation through the transforming work of the Spirit in the Corinthians' hearts that accompanied the presentation of the gospel in Corinth.

(d) Though profound in its present effect, our transformation by the Holy Spirit is subject to the "now/not yet" dichotomy. That is, it will not result in our complete sanctification, our being morally perfect and completely righteous acting, until Christ's return. At that time, we shall be like him (1 Jn. 3:2), but until then we struggle with life in this fallen world (e.g., 1 Pet. 2:11).

(2) All members of the new covenant will "know the Lord" in the sense they will experience a level of relationship with him that previously had been exceptional, something experienced by relatively few.

(a) This covenant-wide "knowing of the Lord," this generalized experience of intimacy with God, will happen because all members of the new covenant will have been forgiven in the full and complete sense accomplished by Christ.

[1] The "For" that begins v. 12 is significant. All in the new covenant will "know" God (v. 11) *because* of the forgiveness that is available there. Lightfoot notes (p. 160) "[F]orgiveness of sins, as the author later emphasizes, is the very heart of the new covenant (10:16-18); for real forgiveness was, above all, what the first covenant lacked (9:9; 10:1-2; 10:11)."

[2] That doesn't mean there was no forgiveness under the old covenant; it means there is something distinctive, something fuller, about the forgiveness available under the new covenant. The forgiveness available through the reality of Christ in some way surpasses that available through the shadow of old-covenant sacrifices.

[3] When this Jeremiah text is cited again in 10:16-17 the focus is on the significance of Jer. 31:34 and how the forgiveness referred to makes unnecessary any further offering for sin. The forgiveness procured by Christ is uniquely efficacious.

(b) As all in the new covenant experience perfect forgiveness, they all experience an intimacy with God. And since they all "know the Lord" in that sense, there is no need for some to instruct others toward that goal. That clearly does not mean members of the new covenant are not to be instructed in doctrine and exhorted to live out the implications of what they already know. The writer of this very letter is doing that, not to mention it is all over the N. T.