

The Order of Melchizedek

ONLY four verses in the OT mention the royal priest Melchizedek (Gen 14:18–20; Ps 110:4). Given such minimal attention, one might think him an insignificant figure in the great drama of biblical history. Yet, in the Letter to the Hebrews, the priesthood of Melchizedek looms large as an anticipation of the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Some investigation into the background of this mysterious priest-king is called for if we are to understand and appreciate the Melchizedek argument in Hebrews.

MELCHIZEDEK THE PRIEST

Let us begin with some basic facts. Melchizedek is the first person in Scripture who is explicitly called a "priest" (Gen 14:18). Indeed, he is the only figure in Genesis who is identified as a priest of "God Most High", the same God that Abraham knows as "the LORD" who made "heaven and earth" (Gen 14:22). The only others to bear the title "priest" in Genesis are pagan clerics who served the idol gods of Egypt (Gen 41:45, 50; 46:20; 47:22, 26). Secondly, Melchizedek is identified as the king of "Salem" (Gen 14:18). Psalm 76:2 identifies this city as Zion, i.e., Jerusalem, as does a long stream of Jewish tradition. This is the holy city that would later become the spiritual center of Israelite religion and the political capital of the Davidic kings. Thirdly, Melchizedek ministers to Abraham as a priest, not only by blessing him (Gen 14:19), but also by bringing forth "bread and wine" (Gen 14:18). These are probably the elements of a thank offering made to God Most High in gratitude for a successful mission, and as such they would constitute a communion sacrifice to be consumed by the priest and participants alike (cf. Lev 7:12–15). Abraham reciprocates these actions by giving a tithe of his spoils to Melchizedek (Gen 14:20), suggesting that a priestly and spiritual service has indeed been performed for the patriarch and his company (cf. Num 18:21).

MELCHIZEDEK'S PRIESTLY ORDER

The Letter to the Hebrews finds theological significance, not only in the person of Melchizedek as an individual, but also in his priesthood. This is why the phrase "the order of Melchizedek" appears five times in the span of three chapters (Heb 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:11, 17). The expression itself is taken from Psalm 110, where the Lord swears an oath of ordination to the Davidic Messiah, making the *king* at his right hand (Ps 110:1) a *priest* after the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4). The statement is striking, since for well over a thousand years, Israel knew only the Levitical priesthood of Aaron and his descendants established by the Mosaic covenant (Ex 40:12–15). No other priesthood was acknowledged by the Law or permitted to officiate on behalf of the covenant people (Num 17:1–13; 18:1–7). So what is this "order" linked with Melchizedek?

Genesis implies that the order of Melchizedek is the patriarchal order of priesthood that functioned for many centuries before the ordination of Aaron and his sons took place at Mount Sinai (Lev 8:1–36). In other words, it is the original, pre-Levitical form of the priesthood that was exercised during the long stretch of pre-Mosaic history. This was the age of natural religion, an era when priestly authority was rooted in the authority structure of the family. In these ancient times, the father of the family conducted public rites of worship, and his sons became his successors in the ministry. In particular, the first-born son, by the natural right of primogeniture, was the primary heir who stood to receive the full measure of his father's priestly and ruling responsibility. This is what we see throughout Genesis, where the Patriarchs—not a professional class of clerical priests—exercised spiritual leadership by building altars (Gen 12:7–8; 13:18), calling upon the Lord in prayer (Gen 21:33; 26:25), consecrating natural landmarks (Gen 28:18–22), pouring out libations (Gen 35:14), and offering sacrifice on behalf of the family (Gen 8:20; 46:1; Job 1:5).

MELCHIZEDEK'S IDENTITY

Such is the historical context in which Melchizedek exercised his priesthood. Being a patriarch, he possessed ruling authority as a "king" as well as religious authority as a "priest" (Gen 14:18). Beyond this, it is interesting to note that the link between Melchizedek and the patriarchal priesthood is even closer according to Jewish and Christian tradition. Several ancient sources identify Melchizedek with the patriarch Shem, the first-born of Noah (Gen 6:10), whose genealogy in Genesis indicates that he lived into and beyond the lifetime of Abraham (Gen 11:10–11). This tradition appears in the oldest translations of Genesis into Aramaic (*Targum Neofiti* and *Fragmentary Targum* at Gen 14:18), in rabbinic commentaries on the Pentateuch (*Genesis Rabbah* 43, 6; *Leviticus Rabbah* 25, 6; *Numbers Rabbah* 4, 8), in the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Nedarim* 32b), and in other religious works as well (e.g., *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 8, 2). It was also aired in ancient Christian writings, such as those of St. Ephraem the Syrian (*Commentary on Genesis* 11, 2), St. Jerome (*Letters* 73), and St. Thomas Aquinas (*Commentary on Hebrews* 7, 1). Noted theologians such as Alcuin, Peter Lombard, and Nicholas of

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no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once for all when he offered up himself. ²⁸Indeed, the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect for ever.

Mediator of a New Covenant

8 Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ^{2a}a minister in the sanctuary and the true

tent^a which is set up not by man but by the Lord. ³For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. ⁴Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary; for when Moses was about to erect the tent,^a he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain." ⁶But as it is, Christ^o has obtained a ministry which is as much

8:1: Ps 110:1.

8:5: Ex 25:40.

Christ, who offered only one sacrifice, and that for his people and not for himself. For a similar use of this technique, see note on Heb 9:12. **once for all:** Several times Hebrews stresses how the single sacrifice of Jesus is definitive and unrepeatable (9:12, 26) (CCC 1085).

7:28 men in their weakness: The high priests of Israel were sinful (7:27) and mortal (7:23), and the Law they administered brought nothing to perfection (7:19). The high priest of the New Covenant is sinless (7:26) and immortal (7:24), and he embodies the perfection of humanity (5:9) made possible in the new economy of grace (10:14; 12:23) (CCC 1540).

8:1–10:39 The climax of Hebrews, where the author demonstrates the superior excellence of the New Covenant over the Old. He shows that the cultic and liturgical traditions of Israel, especially the Tabernacle and the rites of the Day of

Atonement, are earthly and historical signs that teach us about heavenly realities and help us to understand the priestly work of Christ (CCC 522).

 **8:1 the point:** The main idea of the book. **the right hand:** An allusion to Ps 110:1, also referred to in Heb 1:3 and cited explicitly in 1:13. • Psalm 110 provides the template for the presentation of Jesus in Hebrews. It is a messianic psalm that describes how the Lord will *enthron*e the anointed One in *heaven* and ordain him an eternal *priest* in the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:1–4).

8:2 true tent: The sacred dwelling place of God in heaven. The Mosaic Tabernacle was only a model and reflection of this eternal reality (8:5), also called his "holy tent" (Wis 9:8).

8:3 something to offer: Levitical priests offered the blood of bulls and goats in the earthly sanctuary (Lev 16:14–15). In a similar but superior way, Christ offers his own humanity, his body (10:10) and blood (9:12–14), as an atonement sacrifice in the sanctuary of heaven (9:24).

^a Or *tabernacle*.
^o Greek *he*.

Lyra also found insight in the identification of Melchizedek as Shem, as did the *Glossa Ordinaria*, the running commentary that filled the margins of the medieval Latin Bible. Martin Luther accepted this interpretation as late as the sixteenth century (*Lectures on Genesis* 14, 18). Admittedly, it is uncertain whether the author of Hebrews ever knew or accepted this tradition, but it would certainly enhance the parallelism between Melchizedek and Jesus, who is hailed as the Father's "first-born" (Heb 1:6).

MELCHIZEDEK TYPOLOGY IN THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

With this background in mind, let us examine how the priesthood of Christ is linked with the order of Melchizedek. **(1) Royal Priesthood.** In the theology of Hebrews, Jesus is both king and high priest, just like Melchizedek. For much of the Old Testament period, these two offices were entrusted to two different families: Aaron and his descendants from the tribe of Levi were the priests, while David and his descendants from the tribe of Judah were the kings. However, in the ancient order of Melchizedek, the patriarch, and eventually his first-born heir, wore the two crowns of ruling and religious authority. **(2) Priesthood in Salem.** The ministry of Melchizedek in the earthly Salem foreshadows the ministry of Jesus in the "heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb 12:22). According to Hebrews, this is the celestial city that the Lord has "prepared" for the saints (Heb 11:16); it is the city high above, whose "builder and maker is God" (Heb 11:10). There Jesus ministers as king and high priest of the People of God (Heb 8:1–5), having entered into heaven when he ascended into glory (Heb 4:14; 9:24). **(3) Inheritance of the Son.** The patriarchal form of the priesthood, based in the natural order of the family, is an earthly model of what is now established in the divine family of God. The Father has raised up Jesus as a Son, indeed, as the "first-born" Son (1:6), exalting him over the angels (Heb 1–2) as well as over the Levitical mediators of the Mosaic covenant (Heb 5–10). Being the Father's eldest Son in the family of faith (Rom 8:29), he is the designated heir who is given authority over the entire created order (Heb 1:2–3). His relational identity is thus akin to a father figure, for he ministers to believers both as his "brethren" (Heb 2:11) and as his "children" (Heb 2:13). **(4) Signs of Bread and Wine.** In the heavenly sanctuary, Jesus offers the Father his "body" (Heb 10:10) and his "blood" (Heb 9:12). This messianic sacrifice is perceived by faith but is veiled from our senses. So for us who eat from his "altar" (Heb 13:10), these have the sacramental appearance of bread and wine (Mt 26:26–28), the very elements once offered in thanksgiving by the royal priest Melchizedek (Gen 14:18). «