

Hebrews, Part 7

The greater Priest and His greater ministry.

Here begins the longest single expository passage in the epistle. Its very length suggests its importance. Its theme is the core theme of Hebrews: That the real resource for the readership in the midst of their pressures is the high priesthood of Christ. They must realize the greatness of that priesthood, its superiority to the Levitical institutions, and the perfect access they have to it based on Christ's death.

The Superior Melchizedek's Priesthood

The writer returned to the theme he had introduced in 5:1-10, but which he doubted his readers would comprehend because they had become "dull of hearing" (cf. 5:11). In the conclusion of his most recent warning as seen in 5:11-6:20, he had renewed the subject of the Melchizedek priesthood previously mentioned.

Chapter 6 closes with these words, "Jesus ... a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." And that leads right into chapter 7:1 where we see mention of events that followed a battle that took place many centuries before that involved Abraham, then called Abram, and his meeting Melchizedek. At this point, we need to give a little more background on this person Melchizedek. For that, we have to go back to Genesis 14 where he is first mentioned in relation to that battle.

Gen 14:8 ... the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) went out and joined together in battle in the Valley of Siddim 9 against Chedorlaomer king of Elam, Tidal king of nations, Amraphel king of Shinar, and Arioch king of Ellasar—four kings against five. 10 Now the Valley of Siddim was full of asphalt pits; and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled; some fell there, and the remainder fled to the mountains. 11 Then they took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way. 12 They also took Lot, Abram's brother's son who dwelt in Sodom, and his goods, and departed.

Gen 14:14 Now when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his three hundred and eighteen trained servants who were born in his own house, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. 15 He divided his forces against them by night, and he and his servants attacked them and pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus. 16 So he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his brother Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the people. 17 And the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley), after his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him. 18 Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. 19 And he blessed him and said: "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; 20 And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand." And he gave him a tithe of all.

Chapter 7 of Hebrews begins with the events that followed that battle.

Heb 7:1 Now this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the most high God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him. 2 To him also Abraham apportioned a tithe of everything. His name first means king of righteousness, then king of Salem, that is, king of peace. 3 Without father, without mother, without genealogy, he has neither beginning of days nor end of life but is like the son of God, and he remains a priest for all time.

Melchizedek is a very interesting person of which we know very little beyond the Genesis passage, one mention in Psalm 110, and several mentions in Hebrews. Only minimal details about him are given and those are very intriguing, not to mention cryptic.

What is stated:

- He is king of Salem (King of Peace)
- His name means King of Righteousness
- Priest of the Most High God
- He blessed Abram
- Accepted tithes from him
- He is Without father, without mother, without genealogy

- He has neither beginning of days nor end of life
- He is like the Son of God
- He remains a priest for all time.

From this, some have concluded that Melchizedek was a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Second Person of the Trinity, a theophany. The meaning of his name “King of Righteousness” and his title “King of Salem” which means King of Peace certainly points to the Second Person of the Trinity. Melchizedek’s name and title suggest the messianic attributes of righteousness and peace. But note that Melchizedek is only “like the Son of God”. The word translated like (“resembling” in some translations) is *aphomoioo* and means a model or copy but not the real thing. Melchizedek was a type or picture of the Son of God. As a fit prototype for Christ Himself, Melchizedek was both a king and a priest. He both blessed ... Abraham and received his tithes.

The statement that he was “without father, without mother, without genealogy, he has neither beginning of days nor end of life” is referencing the fact that almost nothing is known of his history, life, or family. So far as the Old Testament record is concerned, nothing is known of him. In saying this, the author is often taken to mean that the silence of the inspired record presents Melchizedek as typologically like the Son of God.

He walked onto the stage of life with gifts of bread and wine to share with Abram. That may be an early picture of the Christian communion table. And he walked off the stage of life right after to virtually disappear from recorded history.

He was certainly a priest and, as the passage states in Genesis, he was a “priest of the Most High God” – the same One we worship. What we can conclude from that is God was also working through others while He was working through Abram, but we only have the record of Abram left to us. The fact that Abram gave tithes to him indicates that he understood his ministry and relationship with the same God Abram had been following since being called out by Him when he was still on the Plains of Shinar.

That “he remains a priest for all time” means there was no mentioned provision for a successor to him recorded in Scripture. He, therefore,

abides a priest “perpetually,” “forever,” not literally but in the Scriptural portrait of him. This is one of the points in which “he was made like to the Son of God.” The word “forever” (“for all time”) translates a phrase (eis to *diēnekēs*) that occurs only in Hebrews here and in 10:12, 14 and means “continuously” or “uninterruptedly.” It meant that Melchizedek belonged to an order in which there was no end to the priesthood of those engaged in it. (He later said in 7:8 that Melchizedek “is declared to be living.”)

Some believe Melchizedek may have been an angelic being who reigned for a time at Salem (i.e., Jerusalem). If so, the statement that he was “without beginning of days” would not mean that he was eternal, but simply that he had a pretemporal origin. Nor would this concept of Melchizedek as an angel elevate him to the same level as God’s Son, since the author painstakingly asserted the Son’s superiority to the angels (1:5-14). There is indeed evidence that, at Qumran, Melchizedek was regarded as an angelic personage.

No limit is indicated for his priesthood, and the phrase simply excludes interruption in Melchizedek’s tenure of his office. No one takes it from him. The silence of Scripture, in which the narrative is presented, is treated as having a prophetic force. Melchizedek stands unique and isolated both in his person and in his history. He is not connected with any known line: his life has no recorded beginning or close. The phrase does not describe absolute perpetuity, duration without end, but duration continued under the conditions implied or expressed in the particular case. The idea of the perpetuity of his priesthood lay in the fact that it was continued in Christ.

Heb 7:4 But see how great he must be, if Abraham the patriarch gave him a tithe of his plunder. 5 And those of the sons of Levi who receive the priestly office have authorization according to the law to collect a tithe from the people, that is, from their fellow countrymen, although they too are descendants of Abraham. 6 But Melchizedek who does not share their ancestry collected a tithe from Abraham and blessed the one who possessed the promise. 7 Now without dispute the inferior is blessed by the superior, 8 and in one case tithes are received by mortal men, while in the other by him who is affirmed to be alive. 9 And it could be said that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid a tithe through

Abraham. 10 For he was still in his ancestor Abraham's loins when Melchizedek met him.

The personal superiority of Melchizedek over the patriarch Abraham is guaranteed by the fact that Abraham gave him a 10th of the plunder. And though Melchizedek had no connections with the Levitical order which did not even exist then and would not until the Exodus hundreds of years later, still he both received this tithe from Abraham and blessed him. This act of blessing reinforced his superiority to the patriarch. Moreover, he was superior to the Levites as well. Furthermore, in a sense, Levi paid the tithe through Abraham because ... Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

The writer knew that Levi did not literally pay tithes to Melchizedek, but on the principle that an ancestor is greater than his descendants, Abraham's act affirmed Melchizedek's superiority even to the Levitical priests themselves. Melchizedek thus has a greatness to which the Old Testament record clearly attests.

The new priesthood supersedes the old.

Having established Melchizedek's greatness both personally and in comparison with Abraham and Levi, the writer was ready for a new point. This superiority was needed, since the Law was superseded. The inadequacy of the legal and Levitical systems had to be replaced by something better.

Jesus and the Priesthood of Melchizedek

Heb 7:11 So if perfection had in fact been possible through the Levitical priesthood – for on that basis the people received the law – what further need would there have been for another priest to arise, said to be in the order of Melchizedek and not in Aaron's order? 12 For when the priesthood changes, a change in the law must come as well.

The author argued if the Levitical priesthood, a product of the Law of Moses, had been perfect, and it wasn't, there was no need for a new priest to come out of that order. Its imperfection called for a new superior order, the order of Melchizedek. Since there was a change of the priesthood, it follows that the whole legal system on which the Levitical institutions were predicated also had to be changed, thus, the writer virtually affirmed the

Pauline truth that “you are not under Law” (Rom. 6:14), though he approached it from a different angle.

Heb 7:13 Yet the one these things are spoken about belongs to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever officiated at the altar. 14 For it is clear that our Lord is descended from Judah, yet Moses said nothing about priests in connection with that tribe.

The Levitical priesthood was superseded by the fact that our Lord descended from Judah. That tribe had no role in the Levitical institutions, and the things God had said about the new Priest applied to One from Judah, which is proof that a change was made.

Heb 7:15 And this is even clearer if another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, 16 who has become a priest not by a legal regulation about physical descent but by the power of an indestructible life. 17 For here is the testimony about him: “You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.” 18 On the one hand a former command is set aside because it is weak and useless, 19 for the law made nothing perfect. On the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.

Further proof is found in the consideration that the new Priest has an indestructible (*akatalytou*) life. Psalm 110:4 was here quoted again to show that such an unending life is an inherent part of the order of Melchizedek. Thus the new Priest does not hold His office based on His ancestry.

This rendering freely translates the original which is more nearly represented by the words “a former command is set aside”. The writer seems to mean that the Law which regulated the priestly institution and succession was “carnal” or “fleshly,” not in the sense of being evil, but in the sense that it pertained to people of the flesh who died. But this former regulation has been replaced because of its inherent weakness and uselessness. What has replaced it is the new priesthood which constitutes a “better hope ... by which we draw near to God”. Thus the writer established the point that the Law which made nothing perfect was replaced by a priestly institution that can accomplish its objectives in those who approach God through it.

The superiority of the new Priest.

If, as the author has shown, Melchizedek was greater than Levi (vv. 4-10) and the new priesthood necessarily abrogates the old (vv. 11-19), then the new Priest has to be greater than the Levitical priests.

Heb 7:20 And since this was not done without a sworn affirmation – for the others have become priests without a sworn affirmation, 21 but Jesus did so with a sworn affirmation by the one who said to him, “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever’” – 22 accordingly Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.

The descendants of Aaron assumed their jobs by birth and without any oath. The priesthood of Christ differs dramatically from the Levitical priesthood in that it was instituted with an oath. The writer then quoted again the divine oath of Psalm 110.

Psalm 110:4 The Lord has sworn
And will not relent,
“You are a priest forever
According to the order of Melchizedek.”

This argues for the superiority of the new Priest. Moreover, because of this oath, Jesus became the guarantee (*engyos*, used only here in the NT) of a better covenant. The very person of Jesus assured the superiority of the new order over the old because God’s oath secured His permanent installation in the priestly office.

Heb 7:23 And the others who became priests were numerous because death prevented them from continuing in office, 24 but he holds his priesthood permanently since he lives forever. 25 So he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Since they were subject to death, no Old Testament priest ever remained in office forever. But the permanent priesthood of Jesus gives Him the capacity to carry His saving work to completion.

When the writer asserted that “He is able to save completely,” he continued to have in mind the salvation-inheritance first referred to in 1:14. He is not referring to salvation in the past tense, saved from the fires of Hell. The readers were to hold fast to their professions of faith knowing that He can see them through every trial and difficulty (saved in the present tense) because He is able to intercede for them. In saying this, the author reverted again to a truth he had already enunciated (4:14-16) where he had invited the readers to avail themselves boldly of the mercy and grace accessible to them through Jesus’ priesthood. As they did so, they would find that their Captain and High Priest could get the job done! He could lead them victoriously into the glory of the many sons. In this way, He saves “completely.”

Heb 7:26 For it is indeed fitting for us to have such a high priest: holy, innocent, undefiled, separate from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 27 He has no need to do every day what those priests do, to offer sacrifices first for their own sins and then for the sins of the people, since he did this in offering himself once for all. 28 For the law appoints as high priests men subject to weakness, but the word of solemn affirmation that came after the law appoints a son made perfect forever.

After all, Christ is the kind of High Priest who meets our needs. His character is utterly without blemish and He has been exalted above the heavens. Consequently, He had no need like the Levitical priests to offer sacrifices day after day, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people.

At first sight verses 27-28 seem to refer to the ritual of the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), but that was yearly, not “day after day.” Probably these verses telescope that ritual with the regular sacrificial routine. There seems to be some evidence from Jewish tradition that a high priest was thought to offer daily sacrifice, and the stipulations of Leviticus 6:12-13 may refer to him.

Lev 6:12 And the fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not be put out. And the priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and lay the burnt offering in order on it; and he shall burn on it the fat of the

peace offerings. 13 A fire shall always be burning on the altar; it shall never go out.

In any case, the new Priest had no need either for sacrifices for Himself or for repeated sacrifices for others. His one act of self-offering was definitive and sufficient. Hebrews 9 and 10 will have more to say on this subject. Here the author was content to conclude that, in contrast with the Levitical priests, the Son is a perfected High Priest.

The sufferings of the Son referred to as His sacrificial offering of “in offering himself once for all” (v. 27) are what constituted Him “perfect” for His role in God’s presence where He intercedes for His followers. The Law appointed as high priests those who were weak, but the oath, which came after the Law, appointed this perfect kind of Priest. Accordingly, the readers could go to Him at all times, fully confident of His capacity to serve their every need.

The Superior Service.

In chapter 7, the writer considered the superiority of the new priesthood. It follows that such a priesthood must have a superior priestly ministry. This new ministry and the New Covenant underlies this newer priestly service are the main subjects of chapter 8 of the epistle.

The High Priest of a Better Covenant

Heb 8:1 Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We have such a high priest, one who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, 2 a minister in the sanctuary and the true tabernacle that the Lord, not man, set up.

The author of Hebrews continues in chapter 8 with a clear transitional statement: the “point of what we are saying is this”. He wished to summarize what he had been teaching. By referring to the Lord Jesus as a High Priest “who sat down at the right hand ... of the Majesty in heaven,”

he picked up the wording of 1:3 “who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high”. Similar thoughts are also seen in 10:12 and 12:2.

In the expression “a minister in the sanctuary and the true tabernacle that the Lord, not man, set up,” he touched on the idea of service (*leitourgos*, a “minister” in the priestly sense) in the heavenly sphere.

Heb 8:3 For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. So this one too had to have something to offer. 4 Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest, since there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. 5 The place where they serve is a sketch and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary, just as Moses was warned by God as he was about to complete the Tabernacle. For he says, “See that you make everything according to the design shown to you on the mountain.” 6 But now Jesus has obtained a superior ministry since the covenant that he mediates is also better and is enacted on better promises.

Since the role of a priest involved gifts (*dōra*) and sacrifices (*thysias*), it follows that this new High Priest should have something to offer. Nevertheless, His service cannot be an earthly one since the Levitical ritual of sacrifice continued. This statement implies that the Jewish temple was still standing when the epistle was written, thus it had to be before AD70.

That earthly sanctuary is a mere copy (*hypodeigmati*; cf. 9:23-24) and shadow (*skia*; cf. 10:1) of the heavenly one in which the new Priest ministers. Its status as a “shadow sanctuary” was secured when Moses erected the Tabernacle (a prototype of the temple) under strict divine direction (8:5). But Jesus’ ministry surpasses that of the Levitical priests just as the covenant He mediates supersedes theirs. (The word Mediator is used of Jesus by the author three times—8:6; 9:15; 12:24.)

The superiority of the new priestly service is related to a superior covenant, which in turn is founded on “better promises” (v. 6). Both the covenant and its promises will now be considered.

Heb 8:7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, no one would have looked for a second one.

The writer will shortly prove, by quoting Jeremiah 31:31-34, that there is a promise of a New Covenant. By doing so, he argued that such a promise demonstrates the inadequacy of the old one.

Heb 8:8 But showing its fault, God says to them,

“Look, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will complete a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

9 “It will not be like the covenant that I made with their fathers, on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not continue in my covenant and I had no regard for them, says the Lord.

10 “For this is the covenant that I will establish with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and I will inscribe them on their hearts. And I will be their God and they will be my people.

11 “And there will be no need at all for each one to teach his countryman or each one to teach his brother saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ since they will all know me, from the least to the greatest.

12 “For I will be merciful toward their evil deeds, and their sins I will remember no longer.”

The Old Covenant failed because of the sinfulness of the nation, for which it had no true remedy for dealing with sin. The New Covenant, however, has such a remedy.

In the passage quoted, there is first the prediction that a New Covenant will be made (v. 8) followed by a strong declaration that it will differ from the previous one (v. 9). Then follows (vv. 10-12) a description of the superior accomplishments, or enablements, of the promised covenant. These are:

1. An inner inclination to obey (God will put His laws in their minds and write them on their hearts),

2. A firm relationship with God (I will be their God, and they will be My people),
3. The knowledge of God (they will all know Me)
4. The forgiveness of sins (I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more).

Though the New Covenant is specifically focused on Israel (cf. house of Israel and “house of Judah” in Jer. 31:31), it is clear that Christians of the present time also stand under its blessings as stated in Luke and 2 Corinthians.

Luke 22:20 “Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.”

2 Cor 3:6 who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

This should not be seen as to suggest any confusion between Israel and the Church. The New Covenant is God’s appointed vehicle for fulfilling the Abrahamic blessings to Israel in the Kingdom. The Church is a unique, inter-advent body, united to Christ as His bride and distinct from the nation of Israel. But since all salvation is through the Cross of Christ, it is also through the blood of the New Covenant. The Church does get to enjoy the spiritual blessings of the Kingdom in this current Church Age.

Heb 8:13 When he speaks of a new covenant, he makes the first obsolete. Now what is growing obsolete and aging is about to disappear.

From the Old Testament prophecy he had just quoted, the writer then drew the justifiable conclusion that the Old Covenant was obsolete and aging and would soon disappear. The ceremonies still being conducted under it were spiritually anachronistic, and the author’s words suggest that he recalled the prophecy of Jesus that the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed (Matt. 24:1-2). Probably this prophecy was fulfilled soon after Hebrews was written. If so, it was a dramatic confirmation of the writer’s thesis about the Old Covenant.

What do we have?

- We have a new priesthood, that of the order of Melchizedek, that is superior to the old Levitical order created under the Law.
- This new order is superior because it is based on the promise of God.
- We have a new High Priest that is superior to the high priest under the Levitical system.
- While the Levitical system was merely a shadow of the greater priesthood and could not make possible the forgiveness of sins, this greater system could do that because our High Priest has made an offering of Himself for sins once and forever, and sits on the right-hand of God and intercedes for those who are His own.