

Hebrews 7

A Different Type of Priesthood

Hebrews 7:1-3 The writer has used the phrase ‘the **order** of Melchizedek’ several times in earlier chapters. Perhaps we think of that word ‘order’ as if it describes an ‘order of merit’ or an order of monks or knights – some sort of special group of people. It’s much simpler than that: it just means ‘arrangement’. He is using the historical (but mysterious) figure of this ancient king and priest to illustrate how different is the priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ from the ‘Levitical’ priesthood – the arrangements that were shown to Moses on the mountain (**Genesis 28-31**), and which he passed on to Aaron and his sons. That same priesthood had continued ever since, more than 1250 years.

In later chapters, he will show how Jesus fulfilled the functions of that Levitical priesthood, not in the earthbound tabernacle or temple but in ‘the real thing’, the presence of God, of which the setup in the tabernacle was some sort of picture. But now, he emphasises the ‘differentness’ of Jesus’ priesthood; it is a ‘one-off’, like Melchizedek’s priesthood back in **Genesis 14** and prophesied in **Psalms 110**.

It’s worth a quick look back to **Genesis** to see the context in which Melchizedek appears. About 600+ years before Moses, Abraham (actually still called Abram at that stage) gets mixed up in the wars between local kings, simply because his nephew Lot (and all his household and possessions) has been captured by Chedorlaomer king of Elam and his allies. Abram mobilises his private army of 318 men and chases after the attackers – travelling more than 150 miles to north of Damascus – and rescues everyone : Lot, his wife, his possessions and ‘the people’.

When he gets back to base (‘the oaks of Mamre’ / Kiriath Arba / Hebron), Abram is given a warm welcome by the local king of Sodom who had been overcome by the invaders and then this ‘king of Salem’ suddenly appears with bread and wine for the celebratory feast and passes on a blessing from ‘God Most High’. Abram gives him a tenth of the spoil . . . and Melchizedek disappears from the narrative . . .

. . . then, seemingly randomly, he gets mentioned in **Psalms 110:4**, where King David writes about the promised Messiah, whom he refers to as ‘my Lord’¹ and says that the Messiah is ‘a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek’ . . .

. . . only to appear again here in **Hebrews 7**! From a Jewish point of view, he is a totally unknown quantity: no family history at all, almost a non-person! *“Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually”*. . .

And the Holy Spirit brings all these factors together for the writer of **Hebrews**, seeing in Jesus the fulfilment of **Psalms 110** along with the unique qualities of Melchizedek himself and reinforcing the understanding that Jesus is a completely different sort of high priest, not tied to the arrangements passed down from God to Moses and then to Aaron and his successors.

7:4-10 Greater than Abraham. To a Jew, that was saying something! Abraham was held as the father of the nation and to refer to someone as a son or daughter of Abraham was a respectful way of calling them a member of the Jewish people, God’s chosen ones.²

All Jews knew that they needed to pay a tenth of their income to the Levitical priests. That was clearly in the Law of Moses (**Numbers 18:21**). But, some 600 years earlier, here is Abraham, the father of the nation, paying a tenth to Melchizedek, this king who is not even from God’s chosen people, and certainly not from the tribe of Levi! It’s as if Levi himself (still unborn and ‘in the loins of’ Abraham his great-grandfather) were paying the tithe to Melchizedek. The tithe was a tribute paid to the priests in respect of their representation of the people before God, so given from ‘lesser’ to ‘greater’.

¹ **Matthew 22:41-45, Mark 12:35-37, Luke 20:41-44.** Jesus claimed this prophetic psalm!

² *This makes verses like Galatians 3:29, 4:28 and Romans 11:17 especially meaningful.*

So, similarly, who blessed whom? It was Melchizedek who blessed Abram, not the other way round, so Melchizedek is evidently the greater of the two, despite the fact that the promises of God had been given to Abram! The point is getting across: A priest of the 'order of Melchizedek' takes priority over a Levitical priest.

7:11-22 The Law and the Levitical Priesthood are Redundant.

And also, asks the writer, why did the LORD speak prophetically through David and designate his Messiah in another 'order' of priesthood, not the one defined in the Law of Moses? Simply because that priesthood ('the order of Aaron') was not perfect, no more than the Law itself was (**v.11 & 19**). Jesus was not from the tribe of Levi! He was from the tribe of Judah, descended from King David. As he has been designated 'a priest for ever', there is no need for the Law of Moses and no need for the old priesthood. Priesthood and law run together (**v.12-14**).

What makes that even clearer is that Jesus has been made a priest **for ever** – the power of an indestructible life (**v.15-17**).

Ample reasons already for "*setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness.*" Worth reflecting for a moment on the weakness and uselessness of the Law and the promise of bringing in a better hope (**v.18-19**)! The same hope as described as being 'set before us' in **6:18**.

Adding to all of these factors, the prophecy states clearly that "*The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest for ever'.*" No oath was needed for any priest under the Old Covenant, they inherited their priesthood automatically, simply by being Aaron's offspring (**v.20-21**). Not so with Jesus the Messiah; God the Father specifically intervened with an oath – and we saw the significance of God's oath in **Hebrews 6**.

7:22-25 The Guarantee of a Better Covenant.

So, taking all these facts and factors into account, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant (**v.22**). (There's that word 'become' again!) We'll see more about that in **ch.8**.

There had needed to be lots of priests over the years, because each one died and could not continue. Jesus, by contrast, continues for ever and holds his priesthood permanently. (**v.23-24**) **Therefore**, because he continues for ever and is always there to plead on our behalf,¹ he is able to save those who draw near to God through him – 'to the uttermost', 'for ever', 'totally', 'completely', 'from now through eternity' – and so on! The words *eis panteles* mean 'into full completion'. No half measures here! (**v.25**)

7:26-28 Our Great High Priest.

The writer started writing about Jesus as our High Priest back in **3:1-6** and has taken a couple of important diversions since then, but through **ch.5 & ch.7** he has given us more details about what that means for us. Here he summarises, before launching into describing the **ministry of the High Priest** in the following chapters . . .

- 1) He is holy.
- 2) He is innocent.
- 3) He is undefiled.
- 4) He is 'separated from sinners'.
- 5) He is exalted above the heavens.
- 6) He has offered up himself as the full and perfect sacrifice 'once for all'.
- 7) He is not a weak man appointed by the Law, but 'a Son, made perfect for ever', appointed by the specific promise and oath of God.

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¹ **Romans 8:27 & 34, 1 John 2:1**