

Christ's Superior Priesthood: Chapter 7 begins a four chapter section related to Christ's **superior priesthood**. The author argues that Christ's priesthood, like Melchizedek's, is of an order older than and superior to that of Aaron. Melchizedek was priest long before Aaron was born. Christ was directly appointed priest by the oath of the Father. Chapter 7 provides historical comments on the encounter between Melchizedek and Abraham which is recorded in Genesis 14:17-24.

Chapter 8 emphasizes Christ's superior **covenant**. Chapter 9 emphasizes His better **sanctuary**. Chapter 10, concluding this section, emphasizes Christ's better **sacrifice**.

Hebrews 7:1-10: *“For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, ² 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. ³ 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.⁴ See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! ⁵ And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham. ⁶ But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. ⁷ It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. ⁸ In the one case tithes are received by mortal men, but in the other case, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. ⁹ One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, ¹⁰ for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.”*

Melchizedek: The author first demonstrates Christ's priesthood of the “order of Melchizedek” is superior to priesthood of the order of Aaron. He does this with evidence that Melchizedek is superior to both Abraham and to Levi (the great, great grandfather of Aaron, the first Levitical priest). Melchizedek appears only briefly in

the Old Testament in Genesis 14:17-24 and Psalm 110:4. The author of Hebrews cites key facts about this mysterious man.

The **first point** is Melchizedek is both *king and priest*. Under the Mosaic Law, priests and kings were to be from different tribes. Melchizedek lived about 600 years before the giving of Mosaic Law and the beginning of Levitical priesthood with Aaron. Melchizedek, in his time, was chosen by God to be both king and priest.

The **second point** is *Melchizedek's name is itself significant*. In Hebrew, Melchizedek means “king of righteousness.” The city of which he is king is Salem. Salem means peace. Thus, Melchizedek is “king of righteousness and peace.” Righteousness and peace are often found paired together in Scripture. For example, for anyone to become a believer and enjoy “peace with God,” it is necessary that they be justified (declared righteous) by faith (Romans 5:1).

The **third point**, as explained in 7:4-10, is that Melchizedek *received tithes from Abraham and then blessed him*. The right to receive a tithe and a blessing involves superior authority. Much later, the authority of the Mosaic Law gave the Levitical priesthood a right to receive tithes. Unlike the other tribes, Levites had no inheritance in the land. For their service to the Lord on behalf of the people, and because they had no land inheritance, the Levitical priesthood was authorized by the Law to receive a tenth from the people – that is, from their brothers (Numbers 18:21).

Melchizedek's Right to Abraham's Tithe Came From God: Melchizedek was contemporary to Abraham and lived long before Levi. Melchizedek's right to receive a tithe from Abraham came not from the future Mosaic Law but from authority given directly to him by God. Abraham voluntarily tithed to Melchizedek. Melchizedek validated Abraham's voluntary act by responding with an acceptance of the tithe and then blessing Abraham. The act of blessing Abraham was an official pronouncement coming from one properly authorized to do so. Since *“it is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior”* (7:7). Melchizedek's exercise of official authority over Abraham demonstrates his superiority to Abraham even though Abraham was the recipient of God's promises and Abraham's descendants would include the future Levitical priesthood.

The final point is that Melchizedek's *family history* is unusual. ***“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.”*** Yet, from verse 7:4 we see Melchizedek was a “man.” He surely had a father and mother so what is meant? The significant point is no record exists of his genealogy (or “descent”). This is important because most (but not all) great persons in the Old Testament have their ancestry identified.

It was especially important that priests be able to prove their ancestry (Ezra 2:61-63, Nehemiah 7:63-65). The author of Hebrews is apparently using an argument from silence. As far as the record is concerned, Melchizedek was not born, nor did he die. Since king and priest are lifetime appointments and, as far as the record is concerned, there is no record of his death, it can be argued Melchizedek still serves as priest and king. In his direct appointment by God and in his continuing kingship and priesthood, Melchizedek resembles our Lord Jesus Christ sufficiently that Melchizedek serves as a “type” for Christ. Christ serves forever as our great high priest and King. Though He died on the cross, He was resurrected and ascended into heaven where He sits at the Father’s right hand where He lives today.

The Point of Verses 9 and 10: Levi, a future descendent of Abraham, is in a sense present in Abraham when Abraham encounters Melchizedek, pays a tithe to him, and in turn is officially blessed by Melchizedek. The sense in which Levi is present in Abraham is the same sense in which we were in Adam when he sinned.

In the ancient world, a person paying tithes to another was recognition of superiority and a sign of subjection to the one to whom the tithe was paid. Likewise, blessings are bestowed by the the superior to the inferior. These points indicate Melchizedek is superior not only to Abraham but also to Levi.

This information about Melchizedek is helpful, but in spite of the author’s explanations and of the efforts of interpreters through the ages, Melchizedek remains a rather mysterious person of great interest to us since our Lord is declared a priest of the order of Melchizedek.

Requirements for being a Hebrew Priest: Keep in mind Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians during a time before the destruction of Jerusalem when the Levitical priesthood was still active. The Jewish Christians receiving this letter were very familiar with Levitical requirements to become a priest.

A Jewish priest was required to have a specific genealogy. He had to be a male from the tribe of Levi able to verify that he was descended directly from Aaron. A priest's mother was also subject to specific requirements. She had to be an Israelite, never divorced and not guilty of immoral behavior.

A priest's term of service had a very definite beginning and end. A man could not begin to serve as a priest until his 30th birthday. He could not serve more than 30 years, but most served only to age 50. In summary, **every priest was subject to having a definite genealogy, definite requirements on his father and mother, definite beginning to his service as a priest, and a definite limit on the length of time he could serve.**

Melchizedek Doesn't Qualify as Priest By Levitical Rules: With this in mind, think about Melchizedek. In verse 7:3 Melchizedek is described as without father or mother or genealogy. A Jew's immediate thought would be that without knowing who his father and mother are and what his genealogy is, he can't possibly be a priest. The author's point is that Abraham's behavior indicates Melchizedek is indeed an accepted priest of God Most High even though he doesn't meet the future genealogy requirement, cannot trace his descent to some specific ancestor, is not known to satisfy the restrictions on acceptable father and mother, and his administration as a priest had no constraint on its beginning or end. Melchizedek was startlingly different. He did not satisfy the requirements to be a Levitical priest.

Melchizedek a Type of Christ: In the sense that his priesthood has no end, Melchizedek is said to resemble the Son of God. In this sense, Melchizedek's priesthood was a pre-incarnation model of Christ's priesthood. These statements do not require Melchizedek to be supernatural, but he could be. Some believe that it is Melchizedek's form of priesthood, not Melchizedek's mortal life, that is forever. In verse 7:15 the author says that *"another priest (Christ) arises in the likeness of*

Melchizedek.” As a type of Christ, Melchizedek would resemble Christ in some ways but not in all ways. Types always resemble the real thing but only in limited ways.

Rabbinical Reasoning: In these verses the author uses a form of “rabbinical reasoning” which is used to fill gaps in Scripture without distorting the intended meaning. Such arguments are based on the literary sense of the information Scripture actually provides. The true author of Scripture is God. It is reasoned that if God causes Scripture to be silent on some aspect of a topic, then that silence can be taken as inferring a positive statement.

In this case, the silence of Genesis 14 concerning Melchizedek’s ancestors, time of birth, and time of death, permits the author of Hebrews to say positively in 7:3 that from a literary sense Melchizedek was without father or mother or genealogy. That statement contrasts dramatically with the established standard for Levitical priests and definitely gets his readers’ attention. A reasonable conclusion in this case might be that since the statement was made by the inspired author of Hebrews, it could be concluded Melchizedek is a supernatural being – an angel or perhaps a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. A counterpoint to this argument appears in verse 7:6 where the author calls Melchizedek “*this man.*”

An Interpretation Dilemma? So, there we have the making of an interpretation dilemma. Note that from the perspective of the author’s argument for the superiority of Christ’s priesthood, it makes little if any difference whether Melchizedek is a natural man or supernatural. But it is a point of definite interest to us. Does the author intend the “no father, no mother, no genealogy” statement to be a literal statement? Or does he intend it to be seen as a literary conclusion based on an inference from silence. Melchizedek’s royal priesthood obviously violates the Levitical requirements and is a type of Christ’s royal priesthood. So, is Melchizedek an angel or a theophany of Christ or a man? If a man, who is he? Does Hebrew tradition offer any insight to Melchizedek?

Melchizedek in Hebrew Tradition: The most common Hebrew tradition is that Melchizedek was Shem the son of Noah. Shem lived 602 years, Abraham lived 175 years and their lifetimes appear to have overlapped by about 108 years. Abraham

is the son of Terah who was of the Shem line. Shem is said to have been a priest. In Joshua 10:1 we find a later king of Jerusalem referred to as Adoni-zedek meaning lord of righteousness. Our author says Melchizedek means king of righteousness. It is not unreasonable then to assume Melchizedek could be a title for Shem and that Shem was known by Abraham as a kinsman. Was Melchizedek Shem? The Jews in drawing their conclusion that Melchizedek was Shem did not yet have the book of Hebrews. Hebrews presents a complicating factor when the inspired author of Hebrews says Melchizedek “is without father or mother or genealogy.” On that basis Melchizedek cannot be Shem because Noah’s son Shem has a known father and mother and genealogy.

A Theophany of Christ? Is it likely Melchizedek was supernatural and perhaps a theophany of Christ? In addition to what has already been presented, there are other complications to drawing this conclusion. In 7:3 Melchizedek is said to resemble the Son of God. This is strange language if he actually is the Son of God. A better translation of that phrase is that Melchizedek was “*made like the Son of God.*” The verse reads that way in many translations. The Greek for “made like” means to “make a facsimile, or make a model or copy.” That being the case, “*made like the Son of God*” means something about Melchizedek, or his ministry, resembled something about the way Christ, or His ministry, would be during Christ’s incarnation – a pre-incarnate model – or type.

Psalm 110:4 calls Messiah a priest “*after the order of Melchizedek*” which seems to clearly differentiate between Christ and Melchizedek. If Melchizedek is a theophany of Christ, it means the text says Christ was a priest after the order of Himself, which is not nonsense but seems an unlikely statement. In Psalm 110, Jehovah addresses David’s “Lord” (i.e. Christ) in the second person, but refers to Melchizedek in the third person. One last point is that Melchizedek was king of a city-state in Canaan. Being king implies a long-term situation. Every theophany recorded in the Old Testament was a temporary manifestation to accomplish some specific task (think of the visitors to Abraham before the destruction of Sodom). My conclusion is Melchizedek was not a theophany of Christ.

Change of Topic: In 7:11-28 the author argues that not only is Christ's priesthood superior but that His superior priesthood replaced the Levitical priesthood. The Levitical priesthood received its authority from Mosaic Law. God's perfection demands that relations between Himself and His creatures be perfect. The Levitical priesthood and Mosaic Law were destined to prove to be temporary because they could not bring about the essential state of perfect sanctification. Mosaic Law dealt primarily with controlling external manifestation of internal realities. It had no power to change a person's inner being. Christ's priesthood was entirely different, deriving its power from His salvation work, His eternal life, and the Father's oath. Christ's priesthood is the basis which provides for a person to receive a new "inner being" through regeneration and transformation.

Hebrews 7:11-14: *"Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? ¹² For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. ¹³ For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests."*

Perfection Not Attainable Through the Levitical Priesthood: The use of the Greek word *teleiosis*, translated in this verse as "perfection," conveys the sense of "completion or fulfillment." A thing is said to be perfect or complete when it fulfills the purpose for which it was designed. The Levitical priesthood was designed to make sinful men acceptable to God. That was possible only within limits and even that only temporarily. Therefore, the Levitical priesthood did not enable attaining perfection. Perfect obedience to the Law was required and no one was able to do that.

Animal sacrifices brought relief from the guilt of sins but must be constantly repeated. No "once for all time sacrifice" was available. Nothing in the sacrifices could bring about a new birth to change hearts and set them on the path of righteousness. The animal sacrifices could not give a worshiper perfect standing

before God (Hebrews 10:13). The Mosaic system of divine Law was never intended to be permanent. We know that from Galatians 3:19-27 where we learn the Law was given to serve as an interim “schoolmaster” to prepare the way for the first coming of Christ.

Fulfillment and Change of the Law: Levitical priests received authority through Mosaic Law (Hebrews 7:28). To change the nature of the priesthood, the Law had to change. It did not satisfy the Law. Mosaic priests were required to be from the tribe of Levi. Jesus was from the tribe of Judah. By His oath, the Father declared Jesus to be a priest of the order of Melchizedek forever. Christ’s priesthood was not Levitical.

The change in Law happened in this way. In His earthly life, Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience to the Mosaic Law. When He was resurrected and ascended to heaven, He was made priest forever of the order of Melchizedek. Christ’s actions fulfilled the Mosaic Law pertaining to the priesthood, nullifying that portion of the Law. Dietary and ceremonial laws were also nullified. The moral law remains.

Mosaic Law brought sinful people temporary relief from the penalty of sin. That was accomplished primarily through sacrifices and rituals which had to be repeated again and again. The strictness of the Law’s structure taught obedience and dependence on God. To realize God’s purpose of having a holy people to dwell eternally with Him, the Law had to be replaced by something more effective, something capable of changing the inner person. Perfect, effective, permanent salvation which changed the inner person was made possible by the finished salvation work of the Son of God, incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth.

Hebrews 7:15-19: *“This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, ¹⁶ who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is witnessed of him, “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” ¹⁸ For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹ (for the law made nothing perfect); but*

on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.”

What is it that becomes *“even more evident?”* It is the things the author has been talking about – the impossibility of achieving holy perfection through the Levitical priesthood. Christ could not be a Levitical priest because He clearly was from Judah and not from Levi. Christ was established a priest on a different principle than Aaron. The priesthood of Aaron and those who succeeded him was *“on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent.”*

The principle by which Christ’s priesthood was established did not depend on external laws. It was based on the inherent power of His life and on the personal oath of God. In Psalm 110:4 God declared Christ to be a priest forever of the order of Melchizedek. All Levitical priests were subject to physical death. Thus, regulations to determine succession were essential in order to maintain the priestly system.

With Christ there is no such need. The very nature of His life is different. It is *“indestructible.”* His priesthood is based on who He is. His nature matches His eternal priesthood. With the coming of this new high priest of the order of Melchizedek, the former commandment is set aside because it proved weak and useless (*“for the law made nothing perfect.”*) The basis of Levitical priesthood is abolished. But Christ cannot be abolished. No one can annul *“the power of an indestructible life.”* Christ has accomplished what the Law could never accomplish. He enables us to draw near to God and through Him we have a better hope. The Law curbed many excesses, but it could not create a pure heart or enable men to live lives of righteousness. The hope of Judaism was the coming of Christ. The recipients of the letter already participate in that blessing.

“You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” (7:17b). In Israel God appointed only one high priest at a time. That is also true in the heavenly realm. Jesus is the one and only heavenly High Priest. He ministers constantly on behalf of His people. Anyone who would draw near to the Father must do so through this High Priest. Through the salvation Christ made possible, we are given a new hope, regenerated, justified, given the indwelling Holy Spirit, and are sanctified, enabled to draw near to God.

What is Next? More on the superiority of Christ's priesthood followed by consideration of the fulfillment of Mosaic Law.