

WHAT MORE CAN GOD SAY?

(Studies in the Letter to the Hebrews)

Study 7

"The Permanent Priesthood"

(Hebrews 7:1-28)

VERSES (to ponder and/or memorize)

"Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (Heb 7:24-25).

WHAT?

MELCHIZEDEK! We shall never really grasp the message of the letter unless we understand the Writer's reference to a little known person by the name of Melchizedek. He is mentioned only twice in the entire Old Testament but no fewer than eight times in the New Testament, all of them in Hebrews (Gen 14:18 ; Ps 110:4; Heb 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:1, 10, 11, 15, 17). To understand his 'role' in this passage, it helps to establish . . .

Two Vital Facts about Priesthood

"Pedigree" was non-negotiable

For a person to be a priest, ancestry was all-important. One of the twelve tribes was selected to be the "priestly tribe" (Levi). It's interesting how this came to be. Simeon and Levi were denied territory of their own in Israel on account of their deception and violence (Gen 34: 49:5-7). But a curse was turned into a blessing in the case of Levi when the Levites were appointed to serve in the tabernacle (Num 1:47-53). They did not possess a "province," but they occupied cities throughout the land so they could serve their compatriots. Moses and Aaron were descendants of Levi; notice the attention given to their family tree (Ex 13-27). All priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests. Levites, in general, were responsible for the worship of Israel, but only the family of Aaron served as priests (Ex 28:1; Lev 8:1 ff). So, members of the other tribes were not entitled to perform the duties assigned to Levites; Levites, in general, were not to perform duties reserved for

the priests, and one task in particular was reserved for the high priest. Only he could enter the Holy of Holies on the all-important Day of Atonement (Lev 16:32-34).

When some Levites opposed Moses and Aaron using a spiritual-sounding argument, Moses asked them, "Isn't it enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the Israelite community and brought you near himself to work at the LORD'S tabernacle and to stand before the community and minister to them? He has brought you and all your fellow Levites near himself, but now you are trying to get the priesthood too. It is against the LORD that you and your followers have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?" (Num 16:3, 8-11)

In his pride, Uzziah, one of Judah's successful kings decided that, as God's anointed king, he could intrude into the priest's office and burn incense to the Lord in the temple. Azariah, and eighty other courageous priests, confronted him in the strongest terms: "It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD. That is for the priests, the descendants of Aaron, who have been consecrated to burn incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful; and you will not be honoured by the LORD God" (2 Chron 26:16-18). Uzziah was furious and became leprous there and then and had to be hurried out of the temple.

When the remnant returned from Babylonian captivity, meticulous care was taken to ensure that those who served as priests were, in fact, descendants of Aaron. Those whose family records (verifying their ancestry) could not be found were excluded from the priesthood (Ezra 1:62-63).

So, a high priest would have to belong to the tribe of Levi and be a direct descendant of Aaron.

The High Priest represents the people

In 5:1, the Writer virtually defines the office of high priest: "Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to *represent* them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins." God gave very specific instructions regarding the garments that the high priest was to wear. Three items of his clothing were of particular significance:

- The names of the twelve sons of Israel were engraved on two onyx stones, six on one and six on the other. They were mounted in gold filigree settings and fastened to the high priest's shoulder pieces. He bore "the names on his shoulders as a memorial before the LORD" (Ex 28:9-14).

- The breastpiece contained twelve precious stones (four rows of three stones) each engraved with the name of one of the twelve tribes (Ex 28:15-21). This was so that "whenever Aaron enters the Holy Place, he will bear the names of the sons of Israel over his heart" (Ex 28:29).
- A plate of pure gold, containing the words 'Holy to the LORD,' was attached to the front of his turban. "He will bear the guilt involved in the sacred gifts the Israelites consecrate . . . it will be on Aaron's forehead continually so that they will be acceptable to the LORD" (Ex 28:36-38).

Here's what these specifications conveyed: **God chose to deal with the entire nation in this one man.** When God saw him, he saw the nation. When the high priest presented an offering, he did so on behalf of the nation. And when he approached God in the appointed way, and he was accepted, they were accepted.

A New Kind of Priesthood

In the very first paragraph of the letter, the Writer portrays Jesus as performing a high priestly function: "After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven" (1:3). In chapter 2, he is even more specific: "He had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people" (2:17). In chapter 4, he gets right into his discussion on the high priesthood of Jesus and this continues into chapter 5. But there is an important matter that needs to be cleared up. How can Jesus possibly be a high priest if he is not a direct descendant of Aaron? He never wore the specified garments, nor did he ever offer the sacrifices prescribed in the law on behalf of the people. In what sense can he be described as a high priest? To answer this question, the Writer refers to Melchizedek.

Who was this Melchizedek?

This remarkable man appears in Genesis 14 out of nowhere and then disappears just as suddenly. We never see him again. Abraham is returning home after defeating some "city-kings" who had attacked Sodom. He is met by Melchizedek, the King of Salem, who serves him bread and wine and blesses him in the name of "God Most High (*El Elyon*), Creator of heaven and earth." Abraham then gives him a tenth of everything (Gen 14:18-20). We never see him again and that is where things might have ended.

But he *is* referred to again. And, the reference is a significant one. It occurs in Psalm 110, which was accepted by the rabbis as a messianic psalm. The psalm, which

celebrates the exaltation of a Davidic king (and ultimately, the King who is destined to occupy the throne of David), commences with the words, "The LORD (Yahweh) said to my lord (Adonai), 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'" (Psa 110:1; Matt 22:44; 1 Cor 15:25; Heb 1:13; 10:13). So, it is fair to deduce that God is speaking to the Messiah. In verse 4, out of the blue, David refers to this little-known figure: "The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek'" (Psa 110:4).

Jesus as the High Priest in the Order of Melchizedek

The chapter falls into three main movements:

- 1-10 gives us some pertinent facts about Melchizedek,
- 11-22 explains why a change was needed in the priesthood, and
- 23-28 explains how Jesus' priesthood is similar to that of Melchizedek and superior to that of Aaron.

Melchizedek, the Righteous Priest-King of Salem (1-10)

His name means "King (*Melech*) of Righteousness (*Tsadaqah*)." Hebrew names were not labels; they conveyed meaning. He was King of Salem (Peace). He was also Priest of the Most High God. (There was "true religion" outside of God's revelation to Abraham). His genealogy is not given (this is unusual in the case of a priest). This is not to say that he had no parents. The Writer is simply drawing attention to the omissions that invest him with particular interest. We have no record of his death (this does not mean that he did not die). William Barclay observes:

The Writer to the Hebrews is here doing what any skilled Jewish Rabbi might do. He is following rabbinic methods of interpretation. . . . Jewish interpreters considered themselves completely justified in arguing not only from the *utterances*, but also from the *silences* of Scripture.¹

Although we know so little about him, he must have been a great man. Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder. Under the law, the Levites who become priests collect a tenth from the people. In a sense, Levi (who was still in the body of his ancestor Abraham) gave a tenth to Melchizedek. Also, Melchizedek blessed Abraham, who had the promises. The lesser is blessed by the greater, so how great must this man have been to have blessed Abraham, the primogenitor of Israel and the father of the faithful?

¹William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews*. The Daily Study Bible. 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1957), 69-71.

A Necessary Change (11-22)

Let's observe the building blocks in the Writer's presentation:

- **There was a shortcoming in the Aaronic Priesthood.**
The very fact that there is a statement in Psalm 110 about another order of priesthood implies that there was *a shortcoming in the Aaronic priesthood*. What need would there have been for priesthood of a different kind if the old order had had the desired effect (7:11).
- **Jesus was from the tribe of Judah.**
To be a member of the royal family, he had to be from that tribe. The one who is described as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek could not have served as a priest under the old order, since *he was from the tribe of Judah*, and no one from that tribe is entitled to serve as a priest (7:12-14).
- **The qualification for this priesthood is not ancestry but personal greatness.**
In the new order of priesthood, the basis upon which one qualifies is *not ancestry but personal greatness*, not one's family tree but "the power of an indestructible life" (7:15-17).
- **This new arrangement requires a different kind of priesthood.**
The law made nothing perfect. It was provisional. (The Writer will say more about this in chapters 8-10). Since the priesthood was integral to the law (which could not bring perfection), *any arrangement that moves beyond the law necessitates a change in the priesthood* (7:18-19).
- **Jesus' eternal high priesthood is guaranteed by a divine oath.**
What's more, unlike the earlier priesthood, *God's declaration regarding the superior priesthood of Jesus was guaranteed by an oath*, by means of which God made his intention in regard to this priesthood emphatic! (7:20-22)

The Superior High Priesthood of Jesus (7:23-28)

His high priesthood is permanent (7:23-24). The very fact that, under the old order, high priests died and were succeeded posed some problems. Some were corrupt. Political appointments were sometimes made. Real concern is expressed in the Mishnah (the oral law of the rabbis in written form) that a high priest may not be able to fulfil his duties. "But because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood," and is subject to none of these disadvantages (7:24).

The salvation he procures is therefore permanent (7:25). Salvation under the law was contingent upon the ministry of a succession of fallible high priests and could

never be described as "complete." But "he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (7:25).

He did not need to offer sacrifices for his own sins (7:26). The high priests, under the law, were as guilty as the rest of the nation and needed the 'covering' provided by the sacrifices as much as anyone else. "Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, *first for his own sins*, and then for the sins of the people" (7:27).

He was able to offer a single, all-sufficient sacrifice (7:27). Here's a point the Writer has anticipated in 1:3 and 2:17, and on which he will elaborate in chapters 9 and 10. But what was assumed earlier is clearly stated here: "He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself" (7:27).

In contrast to the fallible priests of the past, he is perfect (7: 26, 28). Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens . . . For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever. There are two aspects to his "perfection." In the first place, he is perfect in the sense that he is "holy, blameless, pure," etc. In the second, he "has been *made perfect*" in the sense that his human experience fitted him for his high priestly ministry.

NOTES

Was Melchizedek a Real Person?

There is no good reason to believe otherwise. He is mentioned alongside other city-kings in Genesis 14 as the king of a particular city. Some have concluded that Melchizedek's appearance was a theophany (a pre-incarnation appearance of the Son of God) like the appearances to Abraham, Joshua and Gideon (Gen 18:1, 10; Joshua 5:13-15; Judges 6:7-19). The conclusion is based largely on the description in Hebrews 7:2-3, First, the name Melchizedek means "king of righteousness"; then also, "king of Salem" means "king of peace." Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever." The Writer suggests that the non-mention of his parents and his birth or death means that he *resembles* the Son of God. His readers would not have read into this that Melchizedek was anything other than a remarkable human priest-king, a contemporary of Abraham.

Typology

Since God has a single (unfolding) plan of salvation, it is not surprising that some events, practices, and people should prefigure things to come. Obviously typology

can be pushed to ridiculous extremes. Fanciful and far-fetched analogies are unwarranted and are an unnecessary waste of time. Why should we become preoccupied with the shadows when we can see the realities they represent? Melchizedek was a type of Christ in the ways described in Hebrews 7. The offering for sin on the Day of Atonement prefigured the greater sacrifice for sin. That is legitimate typology. But there are some weird and wonderful explanations that impose unintended meanings on Old Testament passages. Significance is sometimes assigned to materials and colours in a manner that has more to do with the interpreter's imagination than with the author's intention (or the Lord's for that matter). So let's stick with the big picture parallels rather than go looking for intricate similarities.

The Crowning of Joshua, the High Priest (Zechariah 6:9-13)

Bearing in mind the rigid distinctions between the monarchy and the priesthood, we come across an amazing scene in Zechariah 6. Joshua, the high priest, and his associates, are declared to be "symbolic of things to come" (Zech 3:8). In particular, they foreshadow a person described as "the BRANCH" (Zech 3:8; 6:12; cf. Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23:5; 33:15). Here the high priest is crowned and Zechariah declares, "He will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two" (Zech 6:13). Interesting, to say the least!

SO WHAT?

1. In what ways does Melchizedek provide us with a picture of Jesus?
2. We know so little about him. Why does the Writer describe him as "great?"
3. Can you think of some reasons for the replacement of the Aaronic priesthood? (11-22)

NOW WHAT?

1. Imagine if you were living under the Old Covenant (the Law). What role would the high priest have played in your standing with God? What might have gone wrong with this arrangement?
2. In what respects are you better off under the high priesthood of Jesus? (7:23-28)

3. There is no specific exhortation in this passage; we are not specifically told to *do* anything. So, what difference might this teaching make in your life:
 - In respect of your assurance of salvation? (Rom 8:32-34)
 - When you slip up in your Christian walk? (1 John 2:1-2)
4. In terms of your service of God, what in this passage motivates you to serve God more diligently?