

August 19, 2003

MELCHIZEDEK AND OUR HIGH PRIEST

The first priest that is mentioned in the Old Testament is a man named “Melchizedek.” He was the king of a place called “Salem” (Genesis 14:18), which many people think to have been Jerusalem.

Melchizedek was a contemporary of Abraham and a priest of “God most High” (Genesis 14:18). When Abraham returned from his defeat of the four kings, Melchizedek came out to meet him, bringing bread and wine; and Melchizedek blessed Abraham (Genesis 14:17-18), saying,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth.
And blessed be God Most High,
who delivered your enemies into your hand.”

Genesis 14:19-20 NIV

This blessing that Melchizedek spoke indicates that he knew that God was the creator of heaven and earth. It also indicates that he knew that it was God that had delivered Abraham’s enemies into his hand. This suggests that Melchizedek also realized that Abraham was someone special in God’s eyes.

Similarly, Abraham seemed to know (or to suspect) that Melchizedek was also someone special in God’s eyes, for he gave him a tithe from the booty that he had taken in his battle against the kings (Genesis 14:20b).

One finds nothing further about Melchizedek in the Old Testament until one gets to the Psalms.

In one of his Psalms, King David reported a conversation between God (Jehovah) and the Messiah. David referred to the Messiah as “my Lord.” David said that God invited the Messiah

(David's Lord) to sit at His (God's) right hand. Here are David's words:

“The Lord says to my Lord:
‘Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.’”

Psalm 110:1 NIV

David also reported that God promised to extend the rule of the Messiah from Zion and that He would cause the Messiah to rule in the midst of His (the Messiah's) enemies. David said,

“The Lord will extend
your mighty scepter from Zion;
you will rule in the midst of your enemies.”

Psalm 110:2 NIV

In connection with these things, David mentioned Melchizedek. He said that God had sworn that the Messiah, (anointed king) would also be a priest. The Messiah, however, would not be a priest like the Levitical priests. He would be a priest like Melchizedek. David said,

“The Lord has sworn
and will not change his mind:
‘You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.’”

Psalm 110:4 NIV

It is important to note that the Messiah had not yet been made a king and priest when David wrote these words. It all lay in the future from David's point of view. Once the Messianic king would be anointed as priest, He would remain priest forever. Although the kingship would end (1 Corinthians 15:24-28), the priesthood

would not. There would be no end to it. David said that since God had sworn an oath about this, He would not change His mind.

Following this reference to Melchizedek in David's psalm, there is nothing more found about Melchizedek in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, however, much is found about him.

MELCHIZEDEK IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In Jesus' day, the Pharisees were looking for a Messiah that would free them from Roman rule. They probably expected that the Messiah, when He came, would free them by force of arms.

Jesus, however, read David's words about the Messiah differently. He knew that the passage does not speak about a king that would reign in a military way.

In order to show the Pharisees that they had not interpreted David's words properly, Jesus asked them,

“What do you think about the Christ [Messiah]?
Whose son is he?”

Matthew 22:42 NIV

They replied, “The son of David.”

Their answer was correct, as far as it went, but it did not go far enough. The Pharisees were expecting an earthly and political Messiah, and their answer, therefore, fell short of the truth. Whereas the Messiah would, indeed, be a son of David, He would also be the Son of God. Knowing this, Jesus asked the Pharisees,

“How is it then that David,
speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’
For he [David] says,
‘The Lord [God] said to my Lord [the Messiah]:
‘Sit at my right hand

until I put your enemies under your feet.”

Matthew 22:43-44 NIV

After having quoted the passage, Jesus asked,

“If then David calls him ‘Lord,’
how can he be his son?”

Matthew 22:45 NIV

The Pharisees could not answer Jesus’ question.

Jesus knew for a certainty that the Messiah is more than just a son of David, because He knew that He was both the Messiah and the Son of God. We know that He knew this, because when Simon Peter said to Him, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16), Jesus did not deny it. He responded, instead, by blessing Simon Peter, saying,

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah,
for this was not revealed to you by man,
but by my Father in heaven.”

Matthew 16:17 NIV

THE HUMILITY OF JESUS

In spite of the fact that Jesus knew that He was the Messiah, the Son of God, and the High priest (elect), He was not ostentatious about it. He wore no royal robes, and in His personal bearing, like in His dress, He showed only modesty and humility.

On earth, Jesus was like all the rest of His earthly “brothers” (Hebrews 2:17); so that later, when He became high priest, He would be able to sympathize with their weaknesses (Hebrews 4:15). He would be, thus, better able to represent them in heaven.

Jesus did not take the honor of being priest unto Himself. God bestowed the honor upon Him (Psalm 110:4). Therefore, He was “called” to the priesthood, as Aaron was (Hebrews 5:4-6).

The priesthood to which He was called, however, was not to be a priesthood in the order of Levi (and Aaron) but in the order of Melshizedek. The book of Hebrews says,

“Although he [Jesus] was a son,
he learned obedience from what he suffered
and, once made perfect,
he became the source of eternal salvation
for all who obey him
and was designated by God
to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.”
Hebrews 5:8-10 NIV

Jesus could not have been a priest while He was on the earth (Hebrews 7:14). Instead, He became one after His resurrection and He now serves in the “inner sanctuary behind the curtain” (Hebrews 6:19). That is, He serves in heaven itself. The book of Hebrews speaks of heaven as the place

“...where Jesus,
who went before us,
has entered on our behalf.
He has become a high priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”
Hebrews 6:20 NIV

THE LAW REGULATING PRIESTHOOD WAS CHANGED

The reason that Jesus could not be a priest, as prescribed by the Law of Moses, was that He did not come from the right tribe. Only men from the tribe of Levi and of the family of Aaron could be priests according to the Law of Moses (Exodus 28:1; Numbers 18:5-7). Jesus, however, came from the tribe of Judah, from which no priests were to come. Therefore, according to the Law of Moses, Jesus could not have been a priest on earth (Hebrews 7:13-

14). For that reason the Law of Moses had to be changed so He could become High Priest.

The fact that Jesus was a priest like Melchizedek, and not like Aaron, indicates that the Aaronic (Levitical) priesthood was weak and in need of change. The book of Hebrews says,

“If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?”

Hebrews 7:11 NIV

So, in view of the fact that the priesthood was changed, the Law of Moses, which regulated the priesthood, had to be changed as well. The book of Hebrews says,

“For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law.”

Hebrews 7:12 NIV

So we see that even though the Law of Moses contained rules for regulating people’s conduct, it made no one perfect. A better law was needed--one that would be based on a better hope. The book of Hebrews says,

“The former regulation [the Law of Moses] is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced,

by which we draw near to God.”

Hebrews 7:18-19 NIV

THE SUPERIORITY OF MELCHIZEDEK'S PRIESTHOOD

No one should think that Melchizedek's priesthood was less valuable than the priesthood of Aaron and sons. The blessing that Melchizedek gave Abraham shows his superiority over Abraham. The book of Hebrews says,

“And without doubt
the lesser person is blessed by the greater.”

Hebrews 7:7 NIV

Abraham acknowledged the superiority of Melchizedek and the importance of his priesthood by paying a tithe to him from the spoils he had taken in battle (Hebrews 7:4-10). In a sense, then, the Levites paid tithes through their father Abraham. The book of Hebrews says,

“One might even say that Levi,
who collects the tenth
paid the tenth through Abraham.”

Hebrews 7:9 NIV

For further evidence that Melchizedek's priesthood was superior to the Levitical priesthood, let us refer to the fact that God introduced the Messiah's priesthood with an oath. You will recall that David said,

“The Lord [God] has sworn
and will not change his mind:
‘You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.’”

Psalm 110:4 (and Hebrews 7:21) NIV

Concerning the oath to the Messiah, the book of Hebrews says,

“Because of this oath,
Jesus has become the guarantee
of a better covenant.”

Hebrews 7:22 NIV

THE UNIQUENESS OF MELCHIZEDEK’S PRIESTHOOD

An unusual feature of Melchizedek’s priesthood is that he stands alone in the Old Testament. He does not appear to have become a priest on the basis of the fact that his father was a priest before him; nor do his children seem to have served as priests after him. The book of Hebrews says that Melchizedek was,

“Without father or mother,
without genealogy,
without beginning of days or end of life,
like the Son of God
he remains a priest forever.”

Hebrews 7:3 NIV

Some people think they see in this passage evidence that Melchizedek was a divine creature, perhaps even Jesus Himself; but the Scriptures do not say this, and there is no reason to draw conclusions about things concerning which the Bible does not speak. A more reasonable way to look at this passage is to see in it a statement that Melchizedek was a solitary figure, for whom no genealogy is found in the Scriptures.

JESUS’ PRIESTHOOD IS PERMANENT

Perhaps, what distinguishes Jesus’ priesthood most is the fact that He lives. This contrasts with all the other priests that have

lived and died. Their bodies are still in their burial places, whereas Jesus' body was raised from the grave. Death puts an end to the service of all other priests (Hebrews 7:23). Concerning Jesus, however, the book of Hebrews says,

“...but because Jesus lives forever,
he has a permanent priesthood.”

Hebrews 7:24 NIV

Since Jesus lives, He is able to help people who come to Him. He helps them get rid of their sins, not just temporarily, as the Levitical priests did (Hebrews 10:1-4), but permanently.

Concerning the fact that Jesus lives, the book of Hebrews says,

“Therefore he is able to save completely
those who come to God through him,
because he always lives to intercede for them.”
“Such a high priest meets our need—
one who is holy, blameless, pure,
set apart from sinners,
exalted above the heavens.”

Hebrews 7:25-26 NIV

THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. Melchizedek was a king in Salem and a priest “of God most high,” yet he does not appear to have been related to Abraham and his family. What does this tell you about God's dealings with mankind? Is He interested in only one tribe of people?
2. Why do you suppose so little is said in the Old Testament about Melchizedek and his priesthood?
3. Melchizedek was both king and priest. Under the Law of Moses, the kingly office and the priestly offices were separated.

Why do you suppose God separated the two offices? Was there some advantage for the children of Israel in these offices being separated?

4. The kingly and priestly offices were reunited in Christ. He, like Melchizedek, is both king and priest. Is it advantageous for Jesus' followers that He is both king and priest? If so, how is it advantageous for them?
5. What are some of the functions (both kingly and priestly) that Jesus Christ carries out for His people?
6. When will Jesus Christ cease to reign as king and lay down his crown? See 1 Corinthians 15:24-28.