

The Melchizedek Priesthood — a Biblical Analysis

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

— Hebrews 7:11–12

Melchizedek is mentioned only ten times in the Bible, eight of which are in the Epistle to the Hebrews.¹ His personal ministry is confined to three short verses in Genesis. As such, he is a figure which most Christians do not spend much time investigating. But despite this, Melchizedek played a significant role in the Biblical account, which the author of Hebrews makes most clear.

But the role which Melchizedek plays in the Biblical record is substantially different from that ascribed to him by Joseph Smith. This new role is described in Joseph’s alteration of the Genesis account, the Book of Mormon and the *Doctrine & Covenants*. It was this expanded role which provided the platform for the institution of a Melchizedek priesthood in Joseph’s new church.

Our goal in this chapter is to first explore the Melchizedek of the Bible. In the next chapter we will explore the Biblical priesthood of Aaron. In chapter 15 we will examine the ways in which Joseph Smith corrupted the concept of both of these priesthoods in his church. We will then see why his concept of a restored priesthood is one of the greatest heresies perpetrated by Joseph Smith.

1. The King James Version has 11 references. This is because the Western and Byzantine Greek texts, upon which the King James Version is based, have the additional phrase “after the order of Melchisedec” at the end of Hebrews 7:21, thus completing its quotation of Ps 110:4. (F.F. Bruce *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, revised edition [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990], p. 170, n.65) The New American Standard and New International Versions do not include this phrase.

Melchizedek in the Old Testament

Before Jesus was born, Melchizedek was mentioned in only two brief passages of scripture, Genesis 14:18–20 and Psalms 110:4.

Genesis 14. Genesis 14 recounts Abram’s defeat of Kedorlaomer and his allies, and his success in reclaiming his nephew Lot from them along with all of Lot’s property. While returning from this victory, Abram was met first by the king of Sodom and then later by Melchizedek who presented him and his company with bread and wine, and blessed him by God Most High. In the three verses which describe this brief encounter, the author is careful to tell us two very significant things about Melchizedek. First, he was king of Salem (which would later become Jerusalem). Second, he was “priest of God Most High.” And as we shall see, the combination of these two attributes—king and priest—in the same person was most rare, and most significant.

Psalms 110. The second passage is Psalms 110:4, “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’ ” This entire Psalm is a powerful and prophetic description of the millennial rule of Israel’s Messiah. Jesus applied it to Himself in Matt. 22:43–45; Mark 12:36 and Luke 20:42. Peter affirmed the early church’s Messianic understanding of it in Acts 2:34–35. And the author of Hebrews makes numerous Messianic interpretations of it as he unfolds to Israel its fulfillment in Jesus (Heb. 1:13; 5:6; 7:17,21; 10:12,13). This scripture, then, alerts us to the fact that Israel’s Messiah is to share the same type² of priesthood as Melchizedek. Indeed, the *type* of priesthood held by Melchizedek was to actually prefigure that of the coming Messiah. And the way in which Melchizedek’s priesthood did this was by possessing the designation of both priest *and* king. This was perhaps a surprising, yet important message for Israel to hear, since they had long anticipated priestly ministry only from the sons of Aaron. To now learn that their long-awaited Messiah, the highest priest of all, would not be of Aaron’s lineage was a major reorientation for them.³

Zechariah 6. There is also a third Old Testament passage which does not refer to Melchizedek per se, but does give us insight and understanding of his important symbolic role. Zechariah lived and prophesied during the time of the Jews return to Jerusalem from their Babylonian captivity, and the rebuilding of their temple there. During this time Zechariah was given eight night visions which were explained to him by an angel. These visions contained not only assurances regarding the successful completion of the temple then in progress, but also of God’s abiding promise to Israel of its ultimate victory over the nations and its rule over them in the coming Messianic age. Immediately after relating these visions Zechariah is directed by the Lord to perform a prophetically symbolic act. He is told to take silver and gold from some of the returning exiles and fashion a crown. He is then told to go and place the crown on the head of Joshua son of Jehozadak, who was the designated high priest during this period. He was to then utter this Messianic prophecy: “Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from this place and build the temple of the LORD. It is he who will be clothed with majesty

2. The expression “after the order of Melchizedek” may be explained as “`manner,' i.e., likeness in official dignity—a king and priest” (according to Gesenius and Rosenmüller as quoted in Unger, p. 711).

3. In reaction to these two diverse functions of their Messiah, an actual “dual-messiah” concept developed within Judaism. “In some strands of Jewish expectation, a distinction was made between the lay Messiah (the ‘Messiah of Israel’ or prince of the house of David) and the priestly Messiah (the ‘Messiah of Aaron’)” (F.F. Bruce, p.123).

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. 6:12–13). So significant was this act, that the Lord directed the crown to be placed in the newly rebuilt temple as a memorial.

So what was the point of Zechariah’s symbolic act? It was this: that in the promised Messiah (1) the roles of both priest and king would be combined in one person and that (2) these roles would be exercised in complete harmony with each other. As we noted above, this combination of both priest and king in one person was also the role played by Melchizedek. But why was this proclamation by Zechariah such a significant message for Israel to hear? Because throughout most of Israel’s history royal kingship and priestly authority were completely separated, not being found in the same person.⁴ And as Israel’s history graphically depicts, there was often less than harmony between Israel’s rulers and its priests.

Melchizedek in the New Testament

Melchizedek is mentioned in only one New Testament book: the Epistle to the Hebrews. His name appears there eight of the total ten times it is mentioned in the whole Bible. There the author makes abundantly clear that Jesus is in fact the Messiah of Israel who was to come as this priest after the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4; Heb. 5:6,10; 6:20; 7:11–22).

At this point we should note that the book of Hebrews is very important to RLDS in their support of not only their Melchizedek priesthood, but for their office of High Priest as well, which will be discussed in the next chapter. They point to the frequent mention of a Melchizedek priesthood as proof that such a priesthood order was in fact a part of the early Christian church, but which was lost over time due to apostasy. This represents, however, a serious error in proof-texting. For the context of Hebrews allows for no such interpretation.

Overview of Hebrews. The book of Hebrews is a Jewish book through and through. It was most certainly written *by* a Jew with considerable understanding of the Hebrew scriptures; it was written *to* Messianic Jews of the first century who were suffering for their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. And throughout the book its author makes allusion to the Mosaic law together with its sacrificial system conducted by Levitical priests. His primary goal was the encouragement of his fellow Jews to continue progressing in Christ, versus falling away from Him and risk losing all. In fact, he says that God Himself gave us His oath (Ps. 110:4) concerning Jesus coming in the order of Melchizedek for the express purpose of giving us just such encouragement (Heb. 6:18).

The earliest Christian Jews were people without a country, as it were. They were ostracized and persecuted by their own countrymen as traitors to Israel, and labeled as troublemakers. And since Judaism had at least some protection under Roman law, their new legal standing was precarious as well. Was it all worth it? Wouldn’t it just be easier to slide comfortably back into conventional Judaism?

Easier? Yes. Better? No! The author explains that there can really be no successful turning back. To what would you turn back? The old covenant has been declared obsolete and has been

4. In the later post-exilic period Judah’s civil ruler unlawfully assumed the office of High Priest as well. The office of High Priest even came to be dispensed by foreign rulers, such as Syria’s Antiochus Epiphanes. Antiochus would designate the High Priest based on bribes, political favors or both. (John Bright, *A History of Israel*, third edition, [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981] pp.419–420; Bruce, pp.124–125; Cross, article on High Priest, p.648.)

abolished (7:18; 8:13; 10:9). And Jesus has been designated the mediator of the new covenant, which is far superior to the old covenant anyway (8:6). The author then seeks to encourage those who are struggling by illustrating a number of the ways in which Christ is far superior. And he warns of the serious consequences of falling away from Him. The book becomes a sharply focused examination of Jesus Christ and His role as God's exclusive means of salvation.

The book of Hebrews does not lend itself well to the use of isolated verses taken out of context. To do so is to distort the author's actual message. But this is exactly what the RLDS do, and which has gotten them into so much trouble. The book is composed of a series of tightly structured and well-reasoned arguments which interconnect. Their ultimate goal is to demonstrate the overwhelming superiority of Jesus Christ over all that Israel had come to acknowledge as precious and holy. One must never lose sight of this over-arching objective on the part of the author.

Jesus Christ—our great high priest, by the solemn promise of God. We first encounter Melchizedek in chapter 5 where he is mentioned two times, vv. 6 & 10. Going back to 4:14 we see the author begin building a case for Jesus being our great high priest. In doing so he identifies two qualifications of a high priest (5:1–10): (1) he must be “selected from among men” (5:1) and (2) he must be selected by God (5:4). When Jesus became flesh, became one of us, he satisfied the first qualification without question. In support of Jesus being selected by God, the author quotes two Psalms which prophesy of the Messiah: 2:7 and 110:4. Psalm 2:7 proclaims “You are my son, today I have become your Father.” The Father confirms this designation to Jesus' disciples, first at His baptism (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11, Luke 3:22) and later at His transfiguration (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35). The second Psalm, 110:4, is the one we discussed above: “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”

By citing these two clear proclamations regarding Jesus' designation by God, the author rests his case: Jesus did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest, he was in fact “called by God, just as Aaron was.” Jesus, then, successfully meets both qualifications, He was selected *from among men* and selected *by God*.

The third time Melchizedek is mentioned is at the end of chapter 6. This time the author is stressing the oath part of Psalm 110:4, “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind.” Starting with v. 13, the author begins to explain why God used an oath to confirm this priesthood upon Jesus. He did it “so that...we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged” (v. 19). We are to find great assurance in the unalterable decree of the Lord. His conclusion is that, through the solemn and unalterable decree of God Himself, “[Jesus] has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”

Melchizedek and his priesthood are greater than Abraham, the Levitical priesthood and the Mosaic law. The final five references to Melchizedek are in chapter 7. There the author explains the superior nature of Jesus' ministry, and that of Melchizedek who prefigured Him. He does this by building off God's solemn declaration in Psalm 110:4 together with Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek in Genesis 14:18–20.

In Israelite thought Abraham is held up as the ultimate patriarch and the great father of their nation. He is esteemed just one notch down from deity. Yet the author of Hebrews reasons that Melchizedek is even greater than Abraham, since in their encounter it was Melchizedek that blessed Abraham, “and without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater” (v. 7).

Furthermore, he reasons that Levi, the great collector of tithes from the nation of Israel, actually *paid* tithes to this Melchizedek through Abraham, “because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.” He concludes that Melchizedek is therefore superior to even Abraham and his lineage.

He goes on to reason that since perfection was attained through Jesus, and since Jesus is a priest in the order of Melchizedek, this Melchizedek priesthood is then superior to the Levitical priesthood, and the Mosaic law, of which it was an integral part. After all, “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?” (v. 11).

He concludes by pointing to the temporary nature of the Levitical priesthood, since death prevented such priests from continuing in office. Jesus, on the other hand, has become a priest, “not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. For it is declared: ‘You are a priest *forever*, in the order of Melchizedek’ ” (vv. 16–17, emphasis mine). Because Jesus alone has a perpetual priesthood, one that lasts forever, His is superior to that of the Levitical priesthood, whose temporary work was necessarily confined only to the lifetime of its holder. “Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent⁵ priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (Heb. 7:23–25).

The fact that Jesus was raised from the dead proves that the power of death has no hold on Him. He has proven beyond any doubt that His life is “indestructible,” unlike the continuous chain of dying Levitical priests. And because He thus “always lives” to intercede for us, He is “able to save completely.” This is what makes Jesus’ priesthood powerful forever—and His alone.

Summary and Conclusion

The Old Testament introduces Melchizedek and tells us that Israel’s promised Messiah would possess the same type of priesthood, by the solemn declaration and oath of God. What made the priesthood of Melchizedek unique were the attributes of both king and priest being held by the same person, which would not be the case throughout most of Israel’s history.

The New Testament (Hebrews) explains that Jesus is this promised priest after the order of Melchizedek, and explains just how far superior this priesthood is above Abraham, the Levitical priesthood and the Mosaic law. Jesus has become a priest *forever*, which makes His work perpetually effective, unlike the work of Levitical priests who always die.

The most important point to note throughout all of this is: with the sole exception of Genesis 14:18–20, where Melchizedek is first introduced, virtually every mention of a Melchizedek priesthood in the Bible is in reference to the specific and unique ministry which Jesus Christ alone fulfills as God’s chosen means of salvation for His people. Nowhere is there any suggestion that there ever was—or should be—an order of Melchizedek priests in the Christian

5. One New Testament scholar suggests that a better translation of the Greek is “untransferable” priesthood; the American Standard Version has the marginal reference “hath a priesthood that doth not pass to another” (F.F. Bruce, p. 171).

church. And the history of the Christian church indeed confirms that no order of Melchizedek priests was ever a part of the church.

Melchizedek was actually a forerunner of Jesus Himself. He prefigured the way in which Jesus would ultimately work, as both king and priest. His name is used in the Bible (1) to illustrate this king-priest relationship and (2) to differentiate his work from that of the Levitical priesthood. And as discussed above, Zechariah 6:9–15 illustrates this same king-priest relationship without even mentioning Melchizedek by name. Clearly, then, the king-priest relationship is more important than the Melchizedek title per se.

Since the Biblical concept of a Melchizedek priesthood always refers to the unique and exclusive role of Jesus Christ alone, any attempt by mere humans to appropriate this title or ministry to themselves actually constitutes a form of blasphemy, by usurping a unique title and function which belong to Jesus alone.

We conclude, therefore, that God could never have authored the institution of a Melchizedek priesthood order within His church. He would never do anything to detract from the glory due Him or His Son. Furthermore, we hold Joseph Smith and his accomplices guilty of blasphemy by attempting to “restore” a Melchizedek priesthood to the church—a priesthood which was never there to begin with. The fact that they were led to do this by spiritual forces they neither understood nor could control is no excuse for their sin. And as if this wasn’t bad enough, they set up a system through which many others would become partakers, albeit ignorantly, of this same blasphemy.