

SESSION EIGHTEEN

**MELCHIZEDEK . . . TO WHOM
LEVI'S ANCESTOR PAID TITHES***Heb 7:1-10***I. INTRODUCTION**

Chapter seven of Hebrews completes the first major movement of the book. The author's concern has been to show the superiority of the New Covenant to that of the Old as part of his attempt to persuade his audience not to abandon their confession of Jesus as the Messiah and resort back to Judaism. To argue his case, the author has made three main points about the superiority of Jesus Christ to *key players* of the Old Covenant (e.g., angels, Moses, Joshua). In chapters 5:11–7:28, the third point is made, namely that Jesus Christ is also a High Priest of a priestly order superior to that of Aaron and the Levitical priesthood. In order to do that, the author must demonstrate two things:

- 1) Jesus is actually a priest (especially since He was descended from Judah), and
- 2) God has brought in another priesthood to supersede the old, of which Jesus is the High Priest

In order to succeed in this argument, the author must expound the Melchizedekian priesthood and the promises made to the Messiah in this regard. However, this will not be easy, especially since his audience is "dull of hearing" (Heb 5:11) and not *spiritually fit* for the "solid food" of God's Word. Hence, he takes the time to warn and exhort them in 5:11–6:20 that they must move on to maturity. They cannot afford to be "sluggish" (5:11; 6:12), since there are precious promises to be inherited for those who endure and who have faith.

Whether or not the readers are truly prepared to comprehend the teachings of the Melchizedekian priesthood, the author proceeds in chapter seven to teach them about this. His logic basically looks like this:

1. Jesus has inaugurated a New Covenant
2. This New Covenant has a different priesthood of which Jesus is the High Priest
3. This new priestly order (through Melchizedek) is superior to the Levitical priesthood of the Old Covenant
4. Hence, the New Covenant inaugurated by Jesus is superior to and supersedes the Old Covenant

Most of chapter seven is thus a comparison and contrast between the Melchizedekian priesthood and the Levitical priesthood, highlighting the ways in which Jesus and the New Covenant priesthood are superior. As a scriptural basis of appeal, the author will utilize two Old Testament passages: (1) Gen 14:18-20, in which Melchizedek is introduced and interacts with Abraham, and (2) Ps 110:4, in which the Messiah is given a divine promise (an oath!) of being a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

The first ten verses of chapter seven (7:1-10) show the superiority of Melchizedek in comparison to Abraham and Levi in preparation for showing that the new priesthood supersedes the old. These verses depict the greatness of Melchizedek as a prototype of our Lord's priesthood.

II. MELCHIZEDEK'S PERSONAL GREATNESS (7:1-3)

A. The Old Testament History of Melchizedek (7:1-2a)

Most of what is known of Melchizedek from the Old Testament is recorded in Gen 14:18-20. Four things are highlighted:

- (1) In Gen 14:18, we are told that he was a king of Salem and a priest of God Most High. Thus, he was both king and priest . . . a most unusual combination.
- (2) Gen 14:19-20 informs us that Melchizedek *blessed* Abraham.
- (3) Gen 14:20 also points out that Abraham gave a tithe to Melchizedek.
- (4) Finally, Melchizedek had something to offer Abram . . . bread & wine.

For the author of Hebrews, each of these three facts casts Melchizedek in a superior way to Abraham, and hence to Levi. In verses 4-10, he will particularly highlight the matter of giving a blessing and of receiving a tithe. In Heb 5:5-6, he had already made mention of Christ being both king and priest, a situation which finds precedent in Melchizedek.

B. His Significance in Light of His Name (7:2b)

Gen 14:18 had made mention that Melchizedek was literally a king, for he was king of Salem. Yet, the author of Hebrews wants to point out the figurative way in which Melchizedek was king. In the Hebrew text of Genesis, the name Melchizedek is a compound name formed from the Hebrew noun *meleḵ* (meaning "king") and *ṣedeq* (meaning "righteousness"). So, even though he rules as king at Salem, in another sense he is "king of righteousness." Obviously, the author of Hebrews is thinking how even Melchizedek's name is an appropriate type of the Lord Jesus. For the author of Hebrews, the Lord Jesus is "the one who sanctifies," i.e., makes righteous (2:11; 13:12). Furthermore, because of His love for righteousness, He will eventually hold a "righteous scepter" in His kingdom, i.e., He will rule righteously.

The name of the place from which he rules (i.e., Salem) is also significant.¹ The Hebrew word *šālēm* (שָׁלֵם) is cognate to the Hebrew word for "peace," *šālōm* (שָׁלוֹם). This is very appropriate, for the One who comes in the likeness of Melchizedek enables us to have peace with God and will eventually rule over a kingdom of peace.

¹ The author of Hebrews does not emphasize the fact that the place of Melchizedek's ministry is connected with Jerusalem, as is the Lord Jesus' ministry. The name Salem is apparently an ancient name for Jerusalem, as the parallelism with Zion in Ps 76:2 indicates. LaSor adds, "Josephus followed the same tradition (*Ant.* i.10.2 [180] and added that it was afterwards called *Hierosolyma*, i.e., 'Sacred Salem.' In another place Josephus identified Salem (*Solyma*) with Jerusalem (*Hierosolyma*) and the City of David (*Ant.* vii.3.2 [65-68])" (Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1979-1988], s.v. "Salem," by William S. LaSor).

C. His Likeness to the Son of God (7:3)

Much discussion has been generated over this statement in Heb 7:3, as though he might be a supra-human individual or perhaps even an angelic figure. This hardly seems necessary. The author is not dealing with a case of miraculous birth, but of a noticeable absence of information concerning his genealogy. The author looks at the Genesis account and is influenced as much by what he does not see as by what he does see. Lane's comments (1:165) are insightful:

The primary purpose of the statement is not to establish a factual point but to exhibit the radical difference that existed between the priesthood of Melchizedek and the more familiar Levitical line of priests. In this context, the silence of the Genesis narrative concerning Melchizedek's parents or line of priestly descent was significant because of the contrast it posed with the Levitical priesthood, where recorded line of descent was required for accession to the priestly office (Exod 28:1; Lev 21:13-15; Num 3:10; 18:1; Ezra 2:61-63; Neh 7:63-65).

The author (in a very succinct manner) remarks "without father, without mother, without genealogy." By this, he means nothing more than the fact that no mention is made in the Genesis account of his parents or line of descent. In contrast to the Levitical priesthood which was based on proven hereditary lineage, Melchizedek's right to priesthood is based solely on the call of God. The same, of course, was true of the Lord Jesus, whose "call" was based on God's oath to Him in Ps 110:4.

The author's conclusion that he had "neither beginning of days nor end of life" is his way of noting that Scripture placed no limitation on his life and work. That is, neither his birth nor death is recorded in Genesis. Lane (1:166) comments, "Melchizedek's sudden appearance and equally sudden disappearance from recorded history evoked the notion of eternity, which was only prefigured in Melchizedek but was realized in Christ."

"Like the Son of God, he abides a priest perpetually." Clearly, the author of Hebrews is viewing the Genesis account of Melchizedek as prefiguring an eschatological reality in the person and ministry of Christ. The absence of remark about Melchizedek's termination of office raises the thought that his priestly ministry never terminated. Of course, in all literalness, he died just like any other man and his ministry did terminate. But from the viewpoint of what is recorded in Gen 14, it *has the appearance* that his ministry was without termination. As one who prefigures the Lord Jesus, Melchizedek's situation is appropriate, because in the case of the Lord Jesus, there literally is no end to His ministry. But how did the author of Hebrews know to read the Genesis account this way? We must keep in mind that he is being influenced by what he knows of Christ in Ps 110:4: "Thou art a priest forever." So, knowing that the Lord Jesus as priest has no end to His ministry, the author of Hebrews could see a *reflection* of this in the way Melchizedek is introduced in Genesis.

III. MELCHIZEDEK'S GREATNESS OVER LEVI (7:4-10)

In verses 4-10, the author will demonstrate that Melchizedek is a priest who was superior to the Levitical priests. The primary motif of these verses is the payment of tithes. Even the secondary matter of bestowing a blessing (vv 6b-7) is related to paying tithes, for it is upon Abraham's

payment of a tithe to Melchizedek that the latter blesses him. Our author sees a great deal of significance in the fact that Abraham pays a tithe to Melchizedek and subsequently is blessed by Melchizedek.

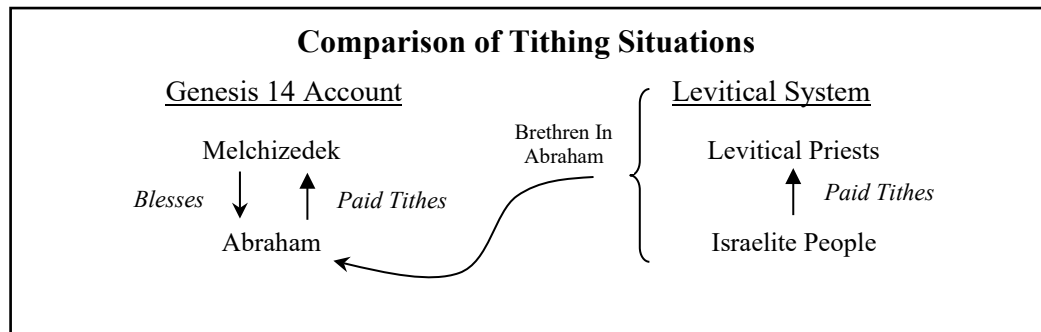
A. Abraham's Payment of a Tithe to Melchizedek (7:4-7)

In order to draw out the full significance of the account in Genesis 14, the author wants us to see that Melchizedek was a very great person in comparison with Abraham. He brings this out in three ways:

- (1) He uses the explicit statement "Now observe how great this man was"
- (2) He highlights the notion of Abraham being "the patriarch"
By giving great esteem to Abraham, Melchizedek is esteemed all the more. In the Greek text, the appositional phrase "the patriarch" is not placed immediately adjacent to the word Abraham but is postponed until the end of the verse for the sake of emphasis.
- (3) He points out that Abraham did not merely give Melchizedek a tenth part, but a tenth of the "choicest spoils" (ἀκροθινίων).

Furthermore, we must understand that Abraham is not merely acting as an individual in this account, but as representative of the entire nation that stems from him. The words "the patriarch" help accentuate this fact. The entire nation (including the Levites) are embodied in him.

Verses 5-6a serve to point out who is paying tithes to whom, which will set the stage for his argument of *superiority* in verses 8-10. This serves to pit one priesthood against the other.



In regard to the Levitical priests, they received authorization from the Law for collecting tithes from the people (Num 18:21-24). In contrast, Melchizedek does not require the Law's authorization to collect a tithe. As important as Abraham was, the fact that he paid a tithe to Melchizedek reflects the fact that it is really the latter who is the greater.

Furthermore, Melchizedek blesses Abraham upon the payment of the tithe, and this further act also demonstrates the superiority of Melchizedek to Abraham (7:6b-7). The lesser does not bless the greater, but the greater blesses the lesser! Hence, the one who blesses (i.e., Melchizedek) is the greater.

B. Abraham Acts As The Figurative Head of the Levites (7:8-10)

In the final three verses, the author draws out two implications of Abraham's act that argue for the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood to the Levitical priesthood. The first is given in verse 8: both Melchizedek and the Levites receive tithes, but the latter do so as "mortal men" whereas the former does so with "apparent unending life." That is, the Law made provision for their succession, whereas no provision was made for Melchizedek's succession. Lane (1:170) comments:

So far as the record of Scripture is concerned, Melchizedek has no end of life and his unique priesthood has no successor. But what is true of Melchizedek in a limited and literary sense is true absolutely of the one who serves his people as a high priest in the presence of God.

The second is given in verses 9-10. Abraham's act was a representative one, not merely a personal one. In giving a tithe to Melchizedek, he did so on behalf of the whole nation who would come forth from him, Levi included. Thus, all those who operate *under the Law* paid a tithe (in effect) to Melchizedek, by virtue of Abraham's tithe. The argument of greater/lesser is thus extended beyond Melchizedek and Abraham, so as to make the contrast between Melchizedek and the Levitical priests. Melchizedek is superior to Abraham and by extension to Levi as well. Thus, the priesthood connected with Melchizedek is superior to the priesthood represented by the Levites. Since the priesthood represented by the Levites is authorized by the Law, i.e., the Old Covenant, then the Old Covenant connected with the Levitical priesthood is likewise inferior to the Melchizedekian priesthood. Because of Christ, the order of Melchizedek has connections with the New Covenant. Thus, the New Covenant is superior to the Old Covenant, and thus there should be no retreat away from the New Covenant to return to the Old. The readers should "hold fast" to their confession!