

Study 7: The Priesthood of Melchizedek

The Old Testament only touches on the life of Melchizedek. The Hebrew writer tells us more about Melchizedek than we learn anywhere else – and he is presented as a type and forerunner of Christ.

The writer has already alluded to Melchizedek, and has begun to outline some of the ways that Jesus' priesthood mirrored his High Priesthood, with the conclusion that Jesus is the Messiah.

How is Melchizedek introduced in the Old Testament?

In what ways is the Messiah likened to Melchizedek?

Why is he greater than Abraham?

Can perfection come from the Levitical priesthood?

How could it be, that the priesthood was changed?

Why would the Law need to be changed (vs 19)?

The priesthood of Christ is better because of an oath.

The priesthood of Christ is better because of its permanence.

The priesthood of Christ is better because of Jesus' character.

Homework:

Read the notes, and reflect on how the Hebrew Christians would have regarded a change to the Jewish system, the Law, and the Priesthood.

- What are the applications for us?
- How could Melchizedek be a “Priest of the Most High God”, and yet not be part of Israel?
- If you read about Melchizedek in the Old Testament, what conclusion would you have reached about his priesthood, and that of the Messiah?

Read Chapter 8 in preparation for next week.

Study Notes for: Study 7: The Priesthood of Melchizedek

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How is Melchizedek introduced in the Old Testament?

MELCHIZEDEK [H4900, G3519] (*[my] king is Zedek [just]*).

Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees, and camped in Hebron, (Gen 13:18 - 15:6). A war breaks out between 4 kings on one side, and 5 kings on the other. The 4 included the king of Shinar (Babylon) and Kedorlaomer king of Elam, on the other side we have the kings of Sodom, and Gomorrah. Kedorlaomer had held the others under bondage for many years, and they finally rebel. The stage is set, and the kings associated with Kedorlaomer soundly defeat those associated with Sodom & Gomorrah, and come to those cities and plunder them.

Amongst the plunder and captives is Lot who was living in Sodom at the time. Abraham hears about this, and now rounds up 318 trained men from his household and heads off in pursuit of them. He attacks them on two fronts, defeats them, frees the prisoners (including Lot), and then heads home again.

On the way back, the king of Sodom (one of the defeated kings from the battle of the kings) approaches Abraham, and offers to do a deal – that Abraham would keep the goods, and the king of Sodom would get the people. Abraham refuses so that the king could not take credit for having made Abraham rich.

At the same time, another king appears, called Melchizedek. He comes out of nowhere, and just as quickly disappears again. He brings bread and wine to Abraham (indicative of a servant offering to look after others). He was not only king of Salem (Jerusalem), but was also priest of God. He now blesses Abraham in the name of almighty God the creator of heaven and earth, and Abraham returns the blessing by giving him 10% of all of the plunder.

After this, God reiterates His promise to Abraham, he believes God and it was counted to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6)

David in Psalm 110 makes a prophecy about the Messiah, that He would be a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. Further, there is a reference to Abraham, that the Messiah would “defeat kings on the day of His wrath”.

In what ways is the Messiah likened to Melchizedek?

1. He was “king of righteousness” and also “king of Salem” (meaning Jerusalem – Ps 76:2) which means, “king of peace”.
2. He was greater than Abraham (since Abraham received a blessing from him, and paid him tithes – more on this later).

3. He has a perpetual priesthood (he came from nowhere, and disappeared just as quickly). He did not have to establish his genealogy, nor his lineage.
4. He was priest of the most high God – and King and Priest at the same time.

Melchisedek's description as "*Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life...*" does not mean that he did not have a father or mother, nor that he "appeared miraculously" instead of being born, nor that he did not die. Rather, it is put in contrast to the Levitical priesthood that required documented proof of lineage to establish the credentials of the priest. Thayer described it as "of whose descent there is no account"¹ Because his priesthood is not passed to his descendants when he died, (how could it be, if there are no records), then the Hebrew writer argues that it must therefore be a continual priesthood "*like the Son of God he remains a priest forever.*" (NIV)

This introduces some stark realities (especially for the Jews), who dismissed Jesus as any form of priest because he came from the wrong tribe (7:14). Here the writer likens Jesus not to the Levitical priesthood, but to Melchisedek's priesthood. Jesus had no father or mother to claim his priesthood through, nor can it be said when His priesthood began (although it can be argued that it began at His ascension – it must also be remembered that Jesus held an exalted position before his birth on earth), and (so far) it has no end!

Why is he greater than Abraham?

The writer gives us two reasons for Melchizedek's greatness. The first of these is that the lower "class" pays tithes to the higher. This is evidenced where:

- The people pay tithes to the priests under the Levitical priesthood,
- The priests under the Levitical priesthood were not greater than Levi,
- Levi was not greater than his great-grandfather Abraham, and in a sense paid tithes to him (7:9)
- Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek.

The second reason, is that of the blessings. Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and Abraham received the blessings from him.

Can perfection come from the Levitical priesthood?

The writer now "throws out a bit of bait" here, and he is to make a stronger point of this at a later time. His argument is that if perfection comes by the Levitical priesthood, then it would remain a continual priesthood.

He now makes a circular argument (vs 12) if taken alone. He will establish at a later time, the transient and temporary nature of the Levitical priesthood. Here, his argument is:

- Melchisedek was better than Abraham (and therefore Levi & his priesthood),
- Jesus is a priest after Melchisedek,
- Therefore the Levitical priesthood was temporary,
- Therefore Jesus is the Messiah.

To which the Jews could answer:

¹ Thayer: The New Thayer's Greek English Lexicon (Hendrikson) (Gk 35) p.6

- Melchisedek was better than Abraham (and therefore Levi & his priesthood),
- Jesus has no credentials as a priest,
- The Levitical priesthood is permanent,
- Therefore Jesus is an imposter.

The whole argument hinges on the transient vs the permanent nature of the priesthood, and on Jesus credentials. So far, the writer has established only the first point, and that only partially.

How could it be, that the priesthood was changed?

The only way for this to happen, was there must have also been a change of the law! Every Jew would recognise this, that the Law and the priesthood go hand-in-hand.

The writer now puts to his readers the argument that IF JESUS IS THE MESSIAH (as he is arguing), then the only way that it could possibly happen was for the Law to change – because Jesus came from the wrong tribe (7:14), and Moses said **nothing** about priests coming from Judah.

It is an interesting point here to observe, that **the silence of the scripture supports nothing**. Just because the scriptures do not say anything against it does not make it right for us to do anything. In order for something to be right for us to do, we must have **authorisation** from the scriptures for us to do it.

It is even more clear (vs 15) when we consider that another priest has arisen who is like Melchisedek. The picture has now crystallised.

The prophecy of David must be remembered: Ps 110:4 “You are a priest forever, after Mechisedek” This was recognised as a Messianic prophecy. It now starts to *drive home* the arguments of the writer. But the question still remains to be proven by the writer, as to whether Jesus was the one!

Why would the Law need to be changed (vs 19)?

The Mosaical law did not make anything perfect. It was only transient. It “*was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ*”. Without the Messiah, there was no hope under the law. No-one was able to keep it perfectly, and consequently everyone has found themselves condemned by it. Only with the perfect Messiah does it all make sense! The sacrifices under the law had to be made over and over again. They could not bring perfection.

But under Christ, we have hope of eternal salvation, and hope of completeness in our service. This is contrasted (in the minds of the readers) with those who were of the priesthood, who had to go through extensive training and study in the Jewish religion (for many years) before they could be elected to serve in the Temple, and say “Abraham is our father”. What **hope** did the priests have? How much better we are under Christ!

The priesthood of Christ is better because of an oath.

When the Levitical priesthood was established, “it was just done”. God said to set it up and do it, and so it was. However, the priesthood of Christ has been established by an oath of God:

7:21 *"The Lord has sworn and will not repent: 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.' "*

The oath of God is identical to the situation with Abraham. God's word is sure enough, and His oath removes any resemblance of doubt. Just as assuredly as the promises made to Abraham can be relied on to be delivered, then also can we be assured of the perpetual nature of the priesthood of the Messiah, and Jesus as the guarantee.

The priesthood of Christ is better because of its permanence.

In the Old Testament, there were many many priests, and many High Priests. There is an obvious reason for this – eventually they get old and die, and are then replaced by others!

But consider the High Priesthood of Jesus: He has an unchangeable priesthood – a permanent one – “...*you are a priest forever*....”

Aaron was the first High Priest, during the wilderness wanderings. But in the fullness of time, Moses takes Aaron and his son Eleazar to Mt Hor. (Num 20:23-28) There Moses strips of the garments from Aaron, which was the symbol of his priesthood, and places them on Eleazer, and Aaron dies on the top of the mountain. Thus the High Priesthood passed from Aaron to his son Eleazer as his successor. Later, Eleazer died and was replaced by his son Phinehas (Josh 24:33).

But the High Priesthood of Jesus was not like this. It was ***a permanent priesthood***. As a permanent priest, He can be relied on to carry out His role of mediation between man and God – unlike the succession of those who went before, who may have died before they fulfilled their work. He is now in a position to guarantee (save to the uttermost) the salvation of those who come to God through Him!

The priesthood of Christ is better because of Jesus' character.

Jesus in fact, was the perfect High Priest. He had endured all of the temptations that could be thrown at Him, “*and yet without sin*”. His demonstrated character of being holy, harmless, undefiled, and separated from sinners led to His exalted position of being “*higher than the angels*” (as we have noticed in a previous study).

Not only does He have the exalted character, but also He has made a better sacrifice than that under the Old law. The High Priest (on the Day of Atonement) would go into the holy place and make atonement for the sins of Israel. Before he did this, he would offer a blood sacrifice. But before he could make atonement for the sins of the people, he had to first make atonement for his own sins. This sacrifice would have to be repeated every year. It was not just made for the sins of the past year, but for all of the sins (the ones of the previous years as well). In addition, the daily sacrifices were offered for the occasional sins (although not always by the High Priest, but usually by the priests).

But Jesus did not have to make the continual sacrifices. He made only one sacrifice, and that was sufficient for all time. (The writer will discuss this further a bit later on).

In conclusion, Jesus was made complete (perfected), and appointed to be a High Priest after Melchizedek under an oath of God, and made a High Priest forever.