

## Typology of Melchizedek and Jesus

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Perhaps no other biblical figure has greater importance with fewer things written concerning him than Melchizedek. While Melchizedek is only mentioned in three separate places in the Bible, his typological significance to Christ is overwhelming and undeniable. As set out in the Bible, Melchizedek is introduced as priest of God and king of Salem in Genesis 14:18-20; this is the historical witness of his interaction with Abraham. The next reference to Melchizedek occurs in Psalm 110:4 where the psalmist reveals that Jesus will be a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek. Finally, the Bible gives a fuller explanation in Hebrews 5:1-10 and Chapter 7 of what the historical account of Genesis and prophecy in Psalm 110:4 mean by showing the parallelism of Jesus and Melchizedek.

The three main typologies of Jesus and Melchizedek are that each was a priest superior to Abraham (order of Melchizedek versus Aaronic priesthood), that each is without beginning and ending in regard to the priesthood, and that each was both a priest as well a king of righteousness and peace.<sup>1</sup> The typology involving Melchizedek points to Jesus as the ultimate High Priest. “We gain an understanding of Christ’s priesthood, the eternal heavenly priesthood, by understanding the features of the earthly perpetual priesthood of Melchizedek.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, “every feature of significance in Melchizedek’s priesthood is recapitulated on a grander scale in Christ’s priesthood.”<sup>3</sup> Before examining in detail the typology, parallelism and symbolism of Jesus and Melchizedek, it will help first to set out briefly who Melchizedek is, and who he is not.

Melchizedek was a priest of God Most High and also king of Salem. He lived in the time of Abraham, of which is generally accepted to be around “two thousand years before the

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<sup>1</sup> Neil R. Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today: A Commentary on the Book of Hebrews* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1976), 151.

<sup>2</sup> Fred L. Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century A.D. and in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 161-162.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

Christian era.”<sup>4</sup> The Bible explains that his name means king of righteousness. Also, he was king of Salem, which translates to mean king of peace. Especially interesting is the fact that Melchizedek is the very first person in the entire Bible to be called a priest. While some have taken this to mean that he is necessarily then the very first person *ever* to be a priest of God,<sup>5</sup> this cannot be concluded based on the text or its context. Due to the brevity of his historical appearance, little else is known with certainty about Melchizedek.

As to who he is not, Melchizedek has been the source of much fascination and speculation since being forever enshrined in the Bible. The mysterious nature of his brief Genesis account coupled with the important prophecy of Psalm 110:4 indeed has lent to the fascination and speculation: “By the first century B.C.E., speculation on the figure of Melchizedek among some Jews had reached a very advanced stage. The ancient “priest of God Most High” had become a heavenly, semi divine being.”<sup>6</sup> The New Testament addition of the Hebrew writer’s description of Melchizedek being “without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life” (Heb. 7:3) surely has deepened the mystery and sparked even more fascination, which has continued through history even up to the present day. Fred Horton says Hebrews 7:3 “stands behind every Christian heresy which speculated about Melchizedek.”<sup>7</sup> An internet search on the name Melchizedek returns a deluge of New Age themed web sites and strange claims to the supernatural. Neil Lightfoot is right on, though, when speaking of Melchizedek’s genealogy: “Of course, the author [of Hebrews] does not mean that Melchizedek was some kind of mysterious being who had no part in human history. On the

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<sup>4</sup> Gerald Thomas Kennedy, *St. Paul’s Conception of the Priesthood of Melchisedech: An Historico-Exegetical Investigation* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1951), 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Fred L. Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition*, 157.

<sup>6</sup> Birger A. Pearson, “Melchizedek in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Gnosticism,” in Michael E. Stone, and Theodore A. Bergren, eds., *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 182.

<sup>7</sup> Fred L. Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition*, 152.

contrary, Melchizedek was a real person. He was without father or mother *with respect to his priesthood.*<sup>8</sup> Melchizedek was not a semi divine being, a fully divine being, an angel, an archangel, a heavenly warrior, the Holy Spirit, or the Lord Jesus himself.<sup>9</sup> He was simply an ordinary human being, a king, and a priest of God Most High, but with extraordinary significance.

### *A Priesthood Superior to Abraham*

The determining characteristics that show Melchizedek's priesthood as superior to the Levitical priesthood are that it had a prior existence and that Melchizedek had seniority over Abraham. As far as its prior existence, this is undisputable. Genesis 14:18 reveals that Melchizedek "was priest of God Most High." It is not until much later in history that God would institute the Levitical priesthood. By having a priesthood apart from Levi and before it, God is showing that he can have a priesthood anytime he wants regardless of any stipulation, as Melchizedek "came into being as [a] priest without benefit of genealogy."<sup>10</sup>

The preexistence of Melchizedek's priesthood also gives it seniority. The seniority of Melchizedek to Abraham is seen in how Abraham gave Melchizedek a tithe (Heb. 7:4) and also received a blessing from him (Heb. 7:6). Concerning the tithe, "The Jews viewed heredity in a realistic manner. Levi was in the loins of Abraham since he was to descend from Abraham. When Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, it was as if the entire Levitical priesthood had

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<sup>8</sup> Neil R. Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today*, 138.

<sup>9</sup> For a treatment of extraordinary claims to the person of Melchizedek in extra-biblical sources, see Birger A. Pearson, "Melchizedek in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Gnosticism," in Michael E. Stone, and Theodore A. Bergren, eds., *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998), 176-202.

<sup>10</sup> Fred L. Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition*, 163.

acknowledged his superiority.”<sup>11</sup> By this one act it can be said that the order of Melchizedek is superior to the Levitical priesthood. Concerning the blessing, the Hebrew writer says when describing the relationship between Melchizedek and Abraham, “It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior” (Heb. 7:7). Blessings flow from greater to lesser.

What all this means in the context of typology is that just as Melchizedek as priest has seniority and superiority over Abraham, and therefore over the entire Levitical priesthood, so Christ as high priest also has seniority and superiority over the Levitical priesthood, because he is in the order of Melchizedek. This point is made by Hebrews when it cites Psalm 110:4 to show that Jesus is a high priest “after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 5:10 and 7:17). God symbolized in Melchizedek the superiority of Jesus’ high priesthood. The fact that Hebrews says Jesus arose in the “likeness of Melchizedek” (Heb. 7:15) proves that he is the ultimate high priest because the order of his priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood. Just as Melchizedek is superior, so is Jesus as well.

#### *A Priesthood with no Beginning and Ending*

Melchizedek appears suddenly in the Genesis account with no background on his history except the brief mention that he was priest and king, and that he blessed Abraham and received the tithe. The Genesis account is otherwise silent on who his parents were, his family line, his date of birth, age, or mention of his death. The Hebrew writer thus reveals in regard to this that “he is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life” (Heb. 7:3). The Hebrew writer’s “main interest in the passage is that it points, by what it does not say...as well as by what it says, to a priesthood different in kind from that of the Levitical

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<sup>11</sup> John MacArthur, “Melchizedek: A Type of Christ,” John MacArthur Grace to You website, <http://www.gty.org/Resources/Sermons/1616> (accessed April 12, 2010).

priests..., held by one who is superior to Abraham and thus to his descendent Levi.”<sup>12</sup> He is “simply using a rabbinical method of interpretation from silence.”<sup>13</sup> As discussed above, it is here that speculation runs rampant, so it is worth repeating that Melchizedek “was without father or mother *with respect to his priesthood*.”<sup>14</sup> Unlike the Levitical priesthood, Melchizedek did not need to be of a certain lineage in order to be a priest, but his was an entirely separate order, and a superior one as has been shown. Also, the fact that he had neither beginning of days nor end of life is to be taken in context of his priesthood: in his short Genesis account, as soon as he is mentioned he is already superior to Abraham without any further explanation. The fact that there is silence on his death also symbolizes that as a priest he is without end of life. Of course, this is brought to light by the explanation in Hebrews Chapter 7.

In the context of typology, this is fascinating and staggering. The Hebrew writer takes the silence of the Genesis account, merges it with the psalmist’s declaration of Jesus as priest *forever* in the order of Melchizedek, and thus shows that Melchizedek “continues a priest forever” as one “resembling the Son of God” (Heb. 7:3). Just as Melchizedek in regard to his priesthood had no apparent beginning or ending but continues as a priest forever, so Jesus also was made high priest without regard to any physical lineage (not of Levi), and with regard to his being the Son of God, he thus continues as high priest eternally (Heb. 7:15-17). According to his eternal nature, “Christ’s high priesthood is distinct from and superior to the Levitical priesthood because, in accordance with Psalm 110:4, his priesthood, like Melchizedek’s, is everlasting.”<sup>15</sup> Melchizedek symbolizes Jesus who has no beginning or ending. Thus, with this eternal priesthood, Christ is

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 351.

<sup>13</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 217.

<sup>14</sup> Neil R. Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today*, 138

<sup>15</sup> Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, trans. Donald H. Madvig (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 165.

able to “save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

### *A Priesthood and Kingship Together*

Another fascinating aspect of the typology of Jesus and Melchizedek is the fact that both were priests and kings, and not just kings, but kings of righteousness and peace. It is universally understood that the roles of king and priest would come to be separated under the Mosaic system, as each would eventually descend from a different tribe (priesthood from Levi per Mosaic Law, royal line from Judah per Genesis 49:8-10). But before this came into effect, the Genesis account involving Melchizedek declares him both priest of the Most High God and king of Salem. Very interestingly, the name Melchizedek means “king of righteousness,” and he is also king of Salem, “that is, king of peace” (Heb. 7:2). It was totally acceptable for Melchizedek to serve as both priest and king, but unacceptable for someone under Mosaic Law.

In the context of typology, two things are of importance. First, that Melchizedek served as both priest and king points to Jesus as the one who would unite the two offices. Psalm 110:1-4 “depicts the [Messiah] as a conquering monarch who unites within his person the twofold dignities of king and priest, as did [Melchizedek] the king of Salem and priest of the most high God.”<sup>16</sup> Jesus is referred to both as lord and priest. Furthermore, concerning the messianic function as both priest and king, Douglas Farrow says,

The unity of the kingly and the priestly is what makes Jesus “that great shepherd of the sheep” which none of Israel’s lesser pastors ever managed to be. As priest he is able to cleanse the conscience (man’s inner sanctuary) by making us presentable to God in his own person. He is our *leitourgos* in the true tabernacle, who when he reappears will bestow an eternal blessing from God. Meanwhile he is able to minister to us in our weakness, lest we fall away and miss that blessing. As king...he is able to establish and

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<sup>16</sup> Gerald Thomas Kennedy, *St. Paul’s Conception of the Priesthood of Melchisedech*, 70.

maintain a secure city, an enduring city with sovereignty over the entire cosmos. He is able to participate with God his Father in the ruling of all things.<sup>17</sup>

The typological significance is that just as Melchizedek was priest and king, so Jesus is the ultimate priest and king who will save us and rule over all.

The second thing of typological importance involves the translation of Melchizedek's name and that he was king of Salem. That the name Melchizedek means "king of righteousness" parallels the prophecy that Jesus would be the "righteous Branch" who would "reign as king" and "execute justice and righteousness in the land" (Jer. 23:5). Also, that Salem means "peace" parallels the prophecy that Jesus would be called "Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). These parallels are significant and go beyond mere coincidence; they point to Jesus as "another priest...in the likeness of Melchizedek" (Heb. 7:15). It is clear that "Melchizedek foreshadowed the *character* of Christ—his priesthood, his kingship, his righteousness, and his peace. Jesus came as a perfect king, a perfect priest, perfect righteousness, and perfect peace."<sup>18</sup>

In the final analysis the typology of Jesus and Melchizedek is not only one of astounding clarity and stunning fascination, but also one of immense importance. That Jesus stands as a priest superior to Abraham and the Levitical priesthood, that he is without beginning and ending in his priesthood, and that he is simultaneously a priest and king of righteousness and peace means that he is the ultimate Lord and Savior of all mankind. Indeed, Jesus is the eternal priest-king after the order of Melchizedek.

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<sup>17</sup> Douglass Farrow, "Melchizedek and Modernity," in Richard Bauckham, Daniel R. Driver, Trevor A. Hart, and Nathan MacDonald, eds., *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 288.

<sup>18</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis*, 217.

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