

Text: Heb 7.1-3

We are about to embark on the longest expository section of Hebrews, all devoted to Jesus' role as our Great High Priest.

“Here begins the longest single expository passage in the epistle. Its very length suggests its importance. Its theme is the core theme of Hebrews. The real resource of the readership, in the midst of their pressures, is the high priesthood of Christ. They must realize the greatness of that priesthood, its superiority to the Levitical institutions, and the perfect access they have to it on the basis of Christ's death.”¹

The priesthood is connected to the mysterious Old Testament figure, Melchizedek. Twice now in Hebrews, the author has identified Jesus as a priest “after the taxonomy” of Melchizedek (5.6, 6.20).

Chapter 7 opens with a long sentence, going from v. 1-3.

“In the opening sentence the writer addresses two questions: (1) who was Melchizedek and (2) what significance is to be attached to his brief and enigmatic appearance to Abraham in primal history?”²

Through church history at least seven different interpretations of Melchizedek have turned up. Most of them are fanciful, the result of speculative interpretation. And I would say that most of them miss the point and provide no spiritual help for us as we read and apply Hebrews to our own lives.

Who was Melchizedek? The simple answer is that he was a real man, a king, probably Canaanite, related perhaps to the Phoenicians, who interacted with Abraham on one occasion recorded in the Scriptures. He is mentioned one more time in a Messianic psalm. Other than that, he is mentioned nowhere else but in Hebrews.

Why does such an obscure figure gain so much importance in Hebrews?

What does that figure mean to us?

¹ Zane C. Hodges, “Hebrews,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 797.

² William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 163.

It will take six chapters to fully answer these questions, today we will get to the first point.

Read Heb 7.1-3

The priesthood of Aaron had many failings, but there was one failing Aaron and every one of his successors had: they died.

No matter how good they were in their role, no matter how faithful to God's law, every one of them died. Every death presented a new challenge, how good would the next one be?

Proposition: Our high priest remains continually, always able to sustain our spirits, always ready to grant us access to God.

I. The main point of the passage: the perpetual order of Melchizedek

A. The sentence structure

1. Subject: "This Melchizedek" (1)
2. Descriptive words and clauses

Verb: "remains continually" (3)

The many descriptive terms obscure the sentence structure

They reminded me of the titles of the King:

UK title: His Majesty Charles the Third, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of His other Realms and Territories, King, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith.

Canada title: Charles the Third, by the Grace of God King of Canada and His other Realms and Territories, Head of the Commonwealth ["defender of the faith" explicitly dropped by the Justin Trudeau government]

B. The perpetual order

1. The "remains a priest continually" so significant that it raises some of the alternate views of Melchizedek
 - a. The term means "continually without interruption"
 - b. That doesn't mean Melchizedek is a supernatural being, but his portrayal has a typical reference

“Melchizedek remains a priest continually for the duration of his appearance in the biblical narrative; but in the antitype Christ remains a priest continually without qualification.”³

2. The concept of typology

a. Definition:

“A literary hermeneutical device in which a person, event, or institution in the Old Testament is understood to correspond with a person, event, or institution in the New Testament.”⁴

1) Type: Melchizedek

2) Anti-type: Jesus Christ

b. The characteristics of Melchizedek correspond with characteristics of Jesus in his priesthood

3. No mention of death = perpetuity of office as far as the Biblical record is concerned

a. The reality is that Melchizedek is a literal human figure

1) He was born

2) He later died

3) But... the Bible doesn't record this

b. The author of Hebrews is using this silence, and the meditation of Psalm 110, to teach truth about Jesus

1) The Messiah is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110.4)

a) A king in waiting (110.1-3)

b) A priest in perpetuity (110.4)

³ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 160.

⁴ Daniel J. Cameron, “Typology,” in *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

2) The Messiah takes up the pattern of Mechizedek, and extends it

C. The theological point

1. The author will use this ultimately to contrast with Aaron
2. Aaron's order is not perpetual, but perpetuated in his descendants
3. Christ's order of priesthood follows Melchizedek, not Aaron

II. The underlying insight into the high order: typified by Melchizedek

A. Historical Melchizedek interacting with Abraham (1-2a)

Read Gen 14.14-24 [key vv. 18-20]

1. Regal office: king of Salem

- a. Ps 76.2 seems to identify Salem with Jerusalem
- b. Some have debated this, instead proposing it as ancient Shechem

It really doesn't matter either way — the Promised Land in Abraham's day seems to be mostly loosely allied city-states, Melchizedek is king of one called Salem.

2. Priestly office: "priest of the Most High God"

"What is startling in the Genesis account is that a Canaanite is apparently functioning as a priest for Yahweh."⁵

- a. Heb. = *el elyon*, God most high
- b. Also used as a term for God among Phoenicians
- c. Nation of Israel not in existence, yet among men of this era knowledge of God must have continued among some
 - 1) Abram (Abraham) for one
 - 2) Job for another
 - 3) And Melchizedek (and others?)

⁵ David Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary 35 (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Publ. Group, 2010), 411.

3. Priestly function: mediating between God and Abraham
 - a. Melchizedek offers Abraham God's blessing (*eulogy*)
 - b. Melchizedek receives from Abraham a tithe of the spoils

"By the act of blessing, Melchizedek at once assumed the position of a superior. And Abraham on his part freely acknowledged Melchizedek's implied claim to superiority, and *divided to him a tithe from all the spoil which he had taken (v. 4).*"⁶

B. Interpreted Melchizedek as understood by our author (2b-3a)

1. The meaning of Melchizedek
 - a. Melchi (Heb. *melek*) = King
 - b. Zedek = righteous, righteousness
 - c. "King of righteousness"
2. The meaning of his title
 - a. Salem = *shalom*, peace
 - b. Thus, King of Salem = King of Peace

Ps 85.10 Lovingkindness and truth have met together;
Righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

Isa 9.7 There will be no end to the increase of *His*
government or of peace, On the throne of David and
over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with
justice and righteousness From then on and
forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will
accomplish this.

Rm 14.17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking,
but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

The name and title of Melchizedek are the type, the
kingdom founded by Jesus Christ the antitype: in him is
united righteousness and peace.

⁶ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1903), 173.

3. The personal [silent] record of Melchizedek

a. Three “negations”

- 1) Without father
- 2) Without mother
- 3) Without genealogy

b. The author argues from the silence of Genesis to make a contrast with Aaronic priests

- 1) Genealogies are extremely imp. in Judaism, esp. for priesthood (Ez 2.61-63, *cf.* Neh 7.63-65)

Ez 2.61-63 Of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai, who took a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and he was called by their name.⁶² These searched *among* their ancestral registration, but they could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean *and excluded* from the priesthood.⁶³ The governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest stood up with Urim and Thummim.

- 2) Melchizedek has no genealogy, yet Abraham acknowledges his priestly position (tithe)

This “implies that Melchizedek’s priesthood was not established upon the external circumstances of birth and descent. It was based on the call of God and not on the hereditary process by which the Levitical priesthood was sustained”⁷

c. The unique Biblical record of the life of Melchizedek

- 1) No birth record, no past
- 2) No death record

⁷ Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 166.

- 3) Instead, “made like the Son of God”
- 4) Doesn’t mean that Melchizedek himself is eternal, but that he is portrayed like one who is eternal

“The choice of the participle in place of ὅμοιος shews that the resemblance lies in the Biblical representation and not primarily in Melchizedek himself. The comparison is not between Christ and Melchizedek, but between Christ and the isolated portraiture of Melchizedek; and that in regard to the divine Nature of the Incarnate Son (τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ) and not to His human Nature in which He both was born and died, nor even to His official dignity (τῷ χριστῷ).”⁸

- 5) The point: the Son of man is this high priest in this class
 - a) Not Jesus the Christ
 - b) But God the Son

No mother, no father, but one who abides forever

III. The reassuring confidence for the present believer: found in Jesus

A. We look back now to the unique temptation of the Hebrews

1. Under intensifying pressure from the Jewish community
2. May be in the years leading up to the Jewish rebellion against Rome (dest. Jerusalem, AD 70)
3. “Are you with us or against us?” – Christians suspected of supporting Rome, or at least not loyal to Israel
4. Many think, let’s go back to Judaism, we’ll be safer
5. Going back to Judaism means relying on an Aaronic priest, not on the Lord Jesus to have access [seemingly] to God

⁸ Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 175.

B. Let's consider the temptations to Christians of our day

1. In some countries, there is intense pressure to show solidarity with the majority (say in an Islamic country) — renounce your Christianity and live
2. In our country, increasing pressure to conform to anti-God values
 - a. Not pressure unto death, mind you
 - b. But still incredible social and psychological pressure
3. There is the normal pressure of the world to conform

I recall a few years ago when there was a Christian woman running for a seat in Victoria under the Reform party label

The Reform MP at the time, Keith Martin, in our area criticized her for her outspoken Christian testimony

- a. Temptation is to conform
- b. Temptation is to “keep quiet”

These temptations seem light compared to the threats of violence the Hebrews might have faced.

Conclusion:

Proposition: Our high priest remains continually, always able to sustain our spirits, always ready to grant us access to God.

Without Him, you have no access to God.

The image of Melchizedek is that in Jesus we have a perpetual priest, always opening the door between us and God.

If you don't know him as Saviour, the door is closed.