

# MELCHIZEDEK AND THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST

## Hebrews 4:14-5:10; 7:1-28

by Dennis McCallum

When reading these two passages, it is easy for a Christian to be totally confused and give up. Yet, this is surely one of the richest passages in the whole of Scripture. Therefore, the author rebukes those of his audience who have no taste for meat (5:11-14) and who are therefore immature. They couldn't understand, and it will be even harder for us to do so since we have none of the Jewish liturgical background that they did. For this reason we will have to start with some background considerations.

### THE SETTING

#### 1. Priests

The issue at hand in this passage is priesthood. We today can hardly understand the importance of this office to the Jewish people for whom the book of Hebrews is written. They were raised with firm convictions that a priest was absolutely necessary in their relationship with God. The priest was a go-between or an intercessor between man and God. Such a person was necessary because of the Holiness of God. Holiness originally did not mean righteousness or being characterized by good. It rather meant that God was totally separate from fallen man and, in a real sense, unapproachable. For this reason, God ordained that certain men who were ritually cleansed in a special way should approach God on behalf of the people. These men were chosen by God for the office. They would give sacrifice to God which symbolically atoned, or paid for the people's sins. We see this principle at work very early in the story of Job (42:7-9).

When God established His covenant with the Jews at Sinai, he chose one family to act as priests. This family was the family of Aaron and in addition, Aaron's tribe, the Levites. The book of Leviticus is written to instruct the "levitical" priests on how to perform their service. One example which will come up later in Hebrews is the day of atonement. On this day, among other things, the priest in charge would give an animal sacrifice for the forgiveness of the people's sins. He then would take some blood (a symbol of death) from the sacrifice and enter the small cubicle where God dwelt in a special way. There he would display the blood symbolically to God(1) thus demonstrating that the sacrifice has been given. Only the high priest could come into this cubicle in the temple. If any one else came in, he was struck dead. This rule was so steadfast that a rope was tied around the priest's ankle so that if he collapsed or died while in the cubicle, he could be pulled out by rope rather than have someone else go in for him. You can see how this demonstrates the unapproachability of God. At the same time, it shows the definite need for a priest to represent us as sinners before God.

Things to Notice: – These points are briefly stated in Hebrews.

- a. Priests give sacrifice to God and represent the other peoples (5:1).
- b. Priests must be cleansed in a special ritual way (5:3).
- c. Priests are chosen for the office by God (5:4).

2. The Problem

As mentioned above, a Jewish priest must be from the tribe of Levi. The author of Hebrews intends to show that Jesus is in fact the only ordained priest that God has for believers. However, Jesus was not from the tribe of Levi but from the tribe of Judah. (See Heb. 7:13,14.) This means that according to Mosaic law, Jesus lacked the first requirement for priesthood.

Besides this even if we grant that Jesus was a priest, He is not on earth now. This would mean according to Old Testament law, that some one should take over to perform the services in the temple. Therefore even if Jesus was a priest, He would not have been one after His ascension.

3. The Audience's Beliefs

The Jews to whom the book is written are apparently somewhat confused as to what they believe. They are willing to admit that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel. Along with this, they probably believed that He would return to rule the world. However, for the reasons mentioned above, they were not sure where they stood with ritual Judaism. Since they weren't sure that Christ was the only ordained priest, they felt it wouldn't do any harm to offer sacrifice in the temple as well. This way they would have "double coverage" and they would avoid persecution from fellow Jews for denying Judaism.

According to the author of Hebrews, this solution was totally intolerable. We will see the reasons for his strong stand in the section "So What?". Now let us see his argument.

**THE ARGUMENT**

The author's task is indeed great. He must prove, using only Old Testament scripture, that Jesus is our only priest, and that anyone intending to approach God must do so through Him alone.

In unfolding his argument, the author uses two principles which are used in scripture and two passages of scripture.

1. The Two Principles

- a. The filial principle. (Heb. 7:7) In all ancient culture, filial piety was very important. A man or woman should know who his betters were (or who his elders were) and should pay them respect. Several ways of showing this respect or observing a person's status were used. One was the blessing. In the Old Testament we see people giving blessings to one another. Whenever this occurs, the greater gives the blessing to the lesser. For instance, a father blesses his children, they do not give a blessing to him. The laymen were blessed by the priest, not visa versa. Another way of observing status was by giving tithe. The layman would give

his tithe to the priest, not visa versa. In this way, we can tell who is greater in any story where a blessing or a tithe is given.

- b. The racial principle. (Heb. 7:9) Several times in the Old Testament God chooses, curses, or blesses an entire nation before they exist. This is because the nation does exist within the founder who is alive at the time. Examples of this can be found in Gen. 9:24-27 and in Gen. 25:23. In addition we are said to have a sin nature because we were in Adam when he sinned (Rom. 5:12-20). What it means is that what happened to your ancestors affects you.(2)

## 2. The Two Passages

- a. Keeping these two principles in mind, let's analyze the first passage. Look at Gen. 14:17-20. This passage introduces us to a rather obscure Old Testament figure named Melchizedek. Melchizedek is a priest. Yet the priesthood was not established for at least 500 years after this incident.(3) Obviously, he must be a priest in some other order than the levitical order. Even Levi, himself, was not born until a hundred years later.

Now this unusual man meets the great patriarch Abraham one day as Abraham is returning with the booty he has won from a battle with some enemy troops. There a very brief but very strange transaction occurs. Notice verse 19. Melchizedek blesses Abraham. According to Biblical and ancient practice this means that both Melchizedek and Abraham realized that of the two of them, Melchizedek was greater. Yet Abraham was himself probably the greatest name in the whole Old Testament! He is the father of the Jews, the father of all the great men of God who followed after. If you grant that Abraham was the greatest man, then Melchizedek becomes even greater--in a word, the greatest man in the Bible except for Jesus Himself! In addition notice that Abraham gives a tithe of his booty to Melchizedek. This reaffirms our earlier conclusion according to principle #a (see above). This finding has great ramifications for theology. It means that there was a priesthood which was not only greater than the levitical priesthood but greater than Abraham, himself. Obviously no levitical priest could be greater than Abraham, and therefore Melchizedek. In addition, according to the racial principle, even Levi and Aaron would have been blessed by Melchizedek.

It is plain to see at this point that there is this great priesthood which is wholly outside of the Jewish people. If Melchizedek had appeared at the time of Christ, all of the other priests would have had to step aside and let him take over. Now if the author can only prove that the Messiah is to be a priest not according to the order of Aaron, but according to this greater order, and not temporarily but permanently, he will have won his case.

Things to notice: The points that I have made here are also made in Hebrews:

- (1) According to the filial principle, Melchizedek is greater than Abraham (Heb. 7:6-7).
- (2) According to the racial principle, Melchizedek's priesthood is greater than the levitical priesthood (Heb. 6:7; 9, 10).

- b. Can the author prove that the Messiah is to be a priest according to the order of Melchizedek? Turn to Psalms 110. Note in verse 1 that King David says "The Lord says to my Lord." The first Lord is Yahweh. The second is Adonia. This second term is one of three common names of God in the Old Testament. It could in some cases be used of a ruler much as we might refer to the house of Lords. However, David, himself, was an absolute monarch. Who would he refer to as Adonia? The only possible answer is "the Messiah". This is how this Psalm has been understood by early rabbis and by the New Testament. It is a prophetic Psalm describing what the Father will do for the son. As we read through it we come to verse 4. "The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind, "Thou art a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek". Everything is right here. The Father promises the Messiah in inspired scripture that He will be a priest according to the higher order of Melchizedek. This eliminates the first problem given above. Since Jesus is not to be a priest in the levitical order, He need not be from the tribe of Levi. Also He is a priest forever. This eliminates the second problem above. No one is to take over when He leaves.

Isn't it amazing that with one mention of Melchizedek in 2000 B.C. only three verses long, and another in 1000 B.C. only one verse long, we have ironclad proof that Jesus Christ is the only proper priest then and now? This should teach us something about the Word of God. Although the book spans 2000 years, it is a perfect unit. Also, it seems plain that the author of Hebrews would never have been able to put this all together by himself. God directed him to it.

### WHO IS MELCHIZEDEK?

It is interesting to notice that the name Melchizedek comes from Melchi which means king, and zedok which means righteousness. His name literally means King of Righteousness (Heb. 7:2). Also, He was the King of Salem. Salem is the word from which comes "Shalom" or peace. Therefore here is also the "King of Peace" (Heb. 7:2). Another strange thing is that as great as this man was, we are given no explanation as to why. Usually a genealogy is given to show that a great one is from some special family (see Mt. 1:1-18). This was more important to ancient and medieval culture than it is today. It would be especially important in the Bible where God so often deals with families and nations. But in this case genealogy is given (Heb. 7:3)! Could it be that Melchizedek, the King of Righteousness and Peace was in fact Jesus Christ Himself? It would seem so according to Hebrews 7:3 and 8:4 Christ, Himself, must have appeared in this case as He did again in Gen. 18:16-33 for some special reason. Probably He foresaw that the priesthood question would become a problem later, so He intervened at this time to solve it. Then by inspiring David and the author of Hebrews to make the appropriate comments, the new arrangement was clarified.

### SO WHAT?

When we establish the fact that Christ is our sole Priest, we have not gone far enough. We have yet to ask "so what?" The facts in scripture aren't alive until we apply them—first to the people they are addressed to, then to ourselves.

Why is God inspiring the author to make such a big deal out of the eternal priesthood of Christ? Why are Christianity and Jewish Priestcraft incompatible? We find the answers to these questions in the remainder of Hebrews 7.

In Heb. 7:11 the writer asks his audience, "If the Levitical priesthood is so great for bringing man and God together, then why did God start planning for a new order way back in the time of Abraham?" It should be obvious that the Mosaic system was never intended to be the ultimate solution to sin, but only a temporary teaching experience. However, another important factor comes in at this point.

"On the basis of it (the Levitical priesthood) the people received the Law." This statement reflects the two part covenant form of the Mosaic law. On the one hand, the people were given commandments (i.e., the ten commandments) and told that they must obey them. On the other hand, if they did disobey, they would seek forgiveness through some of the temple rituals. This formed a second clause to the covenant. If the second clause is abrogated totally, what does this say about the first clause? It says that the first clause is also totally abrogated.

So we see that what is at issue here is very grave indeed. Verse 12 says "When the Priesthood is changed, there takes place a change of law also". Mixing Jewish temple ritual with faith in Christ really constitutes mixing works with grace. What we mean by this is that our acceptance by God must come only by believing in Christ's sacrifice of Himself for us on the cross. To worry about whether they should add their own sacrifices as well meant that they were doubting that Jesus' sacrifice was good enough! This is clearly an intolerable stand.

Imagine how it must have grieved the author of Hebrews to see this trend in the Jewish church. No doubt he had spent his life teaching them to trust in the grace or free gift of God through Christ. Yet now his hard work was going up in smoke before his eyes, because they were turning to their own works for assurance of salvation. No wonder he makes a big deal out of the abrogation of the Mosaic law! He realizes that their life and faith will suffer shipwreck if they continue in this direction.

In this sense the priesthood of Christ begins to also apply directly to us today. Many times we tend to feel that good works on our part will make us in some way more acceptable to God. Sometimes this is explicitly or implicitly taught from the pulpit. We know this because many Christians who attend evangelical churches (who should know better) still believe that Christianity consists mainly of obeying the Ten Commandments, etc. This lack of clear focus concerning the essence of true spirituality present now as then, is dealt with emphatically in chapter seven.

Look at verse 18. "On the one hand there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness." This must have sounded like pure heresy! How could the law of Moses be weak and useless? Even more outrageous would be the suggestion that it should be annulled or set aside.<sup>(5)</sup> Now to those today who love the law—who feel that it cannot be dispensed with in the Christian life—we have only one question. Why does the Bible teach that the commandments are weak and useless?

One answer that might be given is that this only applies to the ceremonial portion of the law of Moses. However, this could hardly be true. In II Cor. 3:7, Paul speaks of the "ministry of death inscribed on stones". This is obviously a reference to the Ten Commandments themselves! Yet they are called the ministry of death. This is coupled to the preceding statement, "We are...servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit, for the letter (the ministry of death) kills, but the spirit gives life." What Paul is saying here, is that legalistic living produces alienation from God.

(5) see ch. 9:26

When we try to please God with works of law we always fail to keep the rules as we should. This always leads to a feeling of guilt and shame when we approach God in prayer. The only other possibility is to rationalize our sin or pretend that our good works outweigh the bad, and such dishonesty is also a barrier to fellowship with God. Paul calls this alienation death. Instead he says, we are now servants of the new covenant of the Spirit.

Hebrews 7:19 says the same thing. "On the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope through which we draw near to God." This "better hope" is the new law-free relationship we have with God. With Christ as our priest and sacrifice, we know that all our sins are surely forgiven. Therefore there is no need to feel shame or guilt, or to rationalize our sins. As far as lifestyle is concerned, in Hebrews 10:16 God says, "I will put my laws upon their hearts, and upon their mind I will write them." We have the Holy Spirit actually living within us. He is able to tell us what to do and give us the power to do it. As a result we can "draw near to God" without fear of any kind. Let us not forget, however, that this kind of relationship is only possible when we first "set aside" the old system of works.

No wonder the author of Hebrews is so insistent on dropping any form of self-performance. Isn't it encouraging to see that the sure proof of Christ's priesthood is the basis upon which this truth is set? To any who will believe "He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them." (Heb. 7:25)

- 1) The method of display is discussed in "Old and New Covenant #1" concerning Heb. 9:4-5.
- 2) For a fuller explanation of this see the author's book, Basic Bible Studies on Col. 3:1-4.
- 3) This incident occurs in approximately 2000 B.C., the law was given to Moses in the 1400's B.C.
- 4) I should point out that many believe that Melchizedek was not in fact Christ but was typical or symbolic of Christ. This is because there is only inference in the Genesis passage to indicate that it was Christ. On the other hand, Salem was a real city which later became Jerusalem. How could he be Jesus if he was the king of a real city? If you accept that Melchizedek was a man who symbolized Christ then verse 3 would read, "...like unto a son of God" and the reference in verse 3 and verse 8 to his eternal existence would be referring to Ps. 110, not Gen. 14. This is possible; but I prefer to obvious meaning of the words in Hebrews.