

Mysterious Melchizedek
Hebrews 7:1–10
January 21, 2024



In the overview sermon for the book of Hebrews, I wrote this: “We live in a day where access is assumed.”

Maybe we assume access a little less *this* Sunday than last.

If you go left out of the church parking lot, heading north, there’s a slight incline on Germantown Road. Unlike the example I used from Stout a couple weeks back, I wouldn’t even call this a hill. But last Thursday morning—when a sheet of ice fell *on top* of the thick snow—I watched car after car struggle to get up that slight incline. They couldn’t ascend. Some cars ended up sideways. Other drivers—like one guy I saw in a svelte sports car—ended up getting out of their vehicle, stopping traffic (on *Germantown Road!*), and sliding in reverse back down that *very* slight incline.

That car sliding in reverse was a nice car. I bet it goes fast. But that day it didn’t go very far. An almost imperceptible incline was suddenly insurmountable. And therefore, he couldn’t get where he wanted, or needed, to go.

Again, this cuts against the grain for us, the Western Suburbanite. I’m used to access. If I want a glass of water, I pour it. If I need to talk to somebody, at *any* point, I can. If I need to get groceries, I go get them. There are no mountains to traverse. There are no deep *fords* to cross. I drive a Ford. Access is assumed.

That entitlement can seep into our thinking in other ways. The book of Hebrews wants us to know—with deep certainty—that we have access to a holy God. But it doesn’t want us to assume that access or presume upon it. These Jewish Christians knew that’s *far* from how Israel thought about approaching a holy God. They’d heard too many stories. In the spirit of Deuteronomy 6, when their child asked about this or that ritual, parent after parent told their children about Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10. Little Joram would’ve known about Leviticus 16:2 when Aaron was told: **he shall not enter at any time into the holy place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, or he will die.** Little Michal and little Abishai would’ve known about Saul and the consequences of his disobedient sacrifices (1 Sam. 15). The stories made clear that you didn’t approach however you’d like. Access wasn’t assumed.

For that reason, among others, the Lord had instituted the priesthood. He told *them* how they might approach on behalf of the people. Only particular people could be part of this vocation, those in the line of Levi. If you couldn’t prove that lineage, as Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 show us, you couldn’t serve as priest.

But today in Hebrews 7 we're *way* before all that. Long before Levi there was another priest, the first priest mentioned in the Scriptures. And his name was Melchizedek.

I called this sermon mysterious Melchizedek because that's what he is. He's the character in Genesis that jumps *into* the narrative—out of nowhere—does something profoundly significant, and then exits stage right not to be seen or heard from again. Though I should say that hundreds of years later, a king in Israel will mention him in one line of a song. But that's all.

Three verses in Genesis 14. One verse in Psalm 110. Let the speculations ensue.¹

We're going to spend three weeks with him. He's fascinating. But the text is not easy. This is fairly clear back in chapter 5 when the author of Hebrews first mentions him. Recall what he wrote, in 5:10 he writes that Christ was **designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.**

I think most pastors would say the Melchizedekian priesthood is hard to explain whether or not those that hear are dull. So, before we get too close to the details, let's look to the author's eventual aim. I think that will help us put the details in context.

As the book of Hebrews tends to be, the argument in Hebrews 7 is tight. Nothing is really tangential. The verses build *upon* one another. As an example, note the first word in verse 10, verse 12, verse 13, verse 14, verse 17, verse 18, verse 19, and verse 21. With just one exception, in both the ESV and the NASB those verses *begin* with the word, "for." *For* this, and then *for* this, and then *for* this. It's an argument. It builds. And what I think would be helpful for us, *before* we dig into it too deeply, is to see what it builds *to*. In one sense Hebrews 7 proceeds along this route, "for, for, for, for, for," and then, verse 25: **Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.**

That's why I began by considering access. The argument of Melchizedek is heading somewhere, and that somewhere is that this priest—the One according to the order of Melchizedek—is able to save those who draw near to God *through Him*, that is, through *this* priest that belongs to *this* priesthood. And further, *this* priest is able to save *forever* for this reason: He always lives.

That's where we're headed. We won't get to verse 25 today, but the end of the argument needs to be in our minds. We'll look at this text under three headings. 1. A Mysterious Melchizedek; 2. A Melchizedekian Priesthood; 3. A Melchizedekian Priest

1. A Mysterious Melchizedek (vv. 1–3)

Verse 1: **For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him.**

I pointed you all to a talk Don Carson gave on Melchizedek at Union University in 2009.² I found helpful the way he talked about many aspects of Genesis 14, but in particular how he demonstrated Melchizedek's "coming out of nowhere." Again, Melchizedek is only mentioned in verses 18, 19, and 20 of Genesis 14. To prove his point, Carson read Genesis 14:8–17, *skipped* verses 18, 19, and 20, and then picked up reading again in verse 21. And even with skipping those three verses, the narrative made complete sense. The point he was attempting to make is that Melchizedek is an *interruption* to the flow. In other words, you don't really *need* those three verses—the ones that mention Melchizedek—to understand the narrative. Out of nowhere, he's inserted.

¹ They began *long* before Hebrews 7 was written. And when we finally hear about Melchizedek again in Hebrews 7, that hasn't made the speculations less rampant.

² <https://www.uu.edu/audio/detail.cfm?ID=396>

But what's more central to the point of Hebrews is that he seemingly comes out of nowhere *genealogically*. In our day, if you're meeting someone new, their genealogy isn't of major concern. But in *that* era lineage would've been a significant detail, in particular in the book of Genesis. That book is a book of origins. It repeatedly says things like, **This is the book of the generations of Adam** (Gen. 5:1). We're told the names of Ham's descendants, of Shem's, of Ramaah's, of Aram's, of Eber's in Genesis 10. In Genesis 11, we read the names of the sons of Arphachshad, of Peleg, and on we could go. We know the genealogy of people in Genesis that we know nothing else about. They did *nothing* in the narrative; and we know their kids' names.

And yet, as we'll see, Melchizedek does something significant. For starters, he's the King of Salem. This is quite possibly what eventually became Jerusalem.³ Before David, before Saul, before it was Jerusalem, he was king of it. Further, verse 1 describes him as priest of the Most High God. He's king *and* priest. As priest, Genesis 14 tells us that he blesses Abraham, the father of the Hebrew nation (v. 7). He blessed the one who had the promises (v. 6) And so we ought to find it surprising in a book where genealogies *abound*, we know next to nothing about this significant person.

This is why speculation ensued. He's one of the more mysterious characters in all the Scriptures. Some have concluded that he was an angelic figure. Others that he's a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ Himself.⁴ To go ahead and address the latter notion, verse 3 of Hebrews 7 says that Melchizedek **was made like the Son of God**, not that he *is* Him.⁵ He, instead, *resembles* Him.⁶

The conclusion of many—including myself—is that the author of both Genesis 14 and of Hebrews 7 present Melchizedek as a historical figure, a man that actually served as both priest and king.⁷ Verse 1 describes an actual scene that unfolded in Genesis: **For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him.** Genesis 14 is fascinating, with or without Melchizedek. Four kings are fighting against five. Lot, Abraham's nephew, is captured. A fugitive tells Abraham Lot's been taken. This is quite the plot. And I don't know how you think about Abraham, but the way this particular narrative unfolds is fairly impressive. He leads hundreds of men—trained men that were loyal to him—in pursuit. They defeat those forces and bring back Lot, the women, and many possessions (Gen. 14:16).

And it's at *this* point in the narrative that Melchizedek shows up. It's seemingly out of nowhere.

What does he do? He blesses Abraham. What did Abraham do in response? Verse 2: **Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all the spoils.** The kings Abraham defeated abandoned many of their possessions so that they might live to see another day. Abraham and the hundreds of men with him load up the wagon. But they don't keep it all themselves. They give a tenth to this Melchizedek. This will be expanded on later in the text.

But we're still in this priest-king's bio. Verse 2 tells us that the translation of his name is actually **king of righteousness**. The "melch" part is "king" and the "zedek" part means "righteousness."⁸ Slam those two words together and Melchizedek means, **king of righteousness**. But he's *also* the king of Salem, a word which shares the same Hebrew letters as Shalom, which we know means "peace." We saw this in Psalm 122 last summer. Jerusalem means city of peace.

³ Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT, 158

⁴ See discussion in Gareth Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, 303–304.

⁵ Tom Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EVTC, 210. Further, why would the author of Hebrews in this context choose to describe the *Son of God* as without a Father? Cockerill, 304.

⁶ ESV.

⁷ Peter O'Brien, *God Has Spoken in His Son*, 71; Harris, 159; Schreiner.

⁸ From *melek* and *sedeq*. See Harris, 159.

Melchizedek is presented here as being a king *both* of righteousness *and* of peace. As verse 3 will make clear, he's been made *like* Another (v.3). Isaiah 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.** Isaiah 32 speaks of a reign to come: **and the work of righteousness will be peace** (Is. 32:17–18). Let's read one more in Psalm 85: **Lovingkindness and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other** (Ps. 85:8–10). Melchizedek is a king of righteousness and peace.

But he's also a priest. That's what verse 3 shifts toward: **Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually.** Now, if Melchizedek *isn't* an angel, and *isn't* a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ Himself, but is instead a historical figure and a man, what do we do with this verse about his lack of father, mother, or genealogy? The overall point, which we'll see *more* as we get into this, is that Melchizedek's priesthood *isn't* based on genealogy.⁹ He's not part of Levi's line. That's in part because he *preceded* Levi.

But Hebrews makes this point based on the way Melchizedek is depicted in Genesis. This is again the “come out of nowhere” aspect of Genesis 14. Everyone else in the book seems to have a genealogy. He doesn't. To use Carson's language, instead of him *literally* not having a father or a mother, it's that *literarily* Genesis presents him that way.¹⁰ It doesn't list Melchizedek's father. Unlike priests later in the Old Testament, we're *never* told of Melchizedek's successor. No one followed him in that particular line. So, in *that* sense, *literarily*, it's *as if* he's always existed and *as if* his priesthood continues to exist.

That's what verse 3 means, **without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually.**

Maybe you're starting to see why there's been confusion and speculation. Maybe you can see why the author of Hebrews tells those dull of hearing that they needed to mature a bit before diving into the deep end of the Melchizedekian priesthood.

2. A Melchizedekian Priesthood (vv. 4–10)

However, to be clear, this order of Melchizedek is not an optional excurses for the reader or an unimportant footnote in the book of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews admonishes them to mature in chapter 6, he *expects* them to, because the Melchizedekian priesthood is central to the argument of the book. He's someone—his priesthood is something—that they *ought* to consider.

Is that pushing it too far? Does Melchizedek really matter that much? How important is this guy, really? To answer that, it's worth noting that verse 4 is a command¹¹: **Now observe how great this man was.** The ESV translates it: **See how great this man was.** Now, is the ultimate aim that we behold Melchizedek? Of course not. But to get where we're going, where Hebrews is taking us, we must look at him first.

And not because I don't think you can pick up the argument one piece at a time, but for clarity's sake, let me go ahead and tell you the overall point and sequential logic of verses 4–10.

The logic begins by asserting that Melchizedek is greater than Abraham (v. 4, 6–7). The second point, building upon that, is that Melchizedek is also greater than Levi (vv. 5, 8–10). Why is that so important to the overall argument? Because if Melchizedek is greater than Levi, it follows that the Melchizedekian priesthood is greater than the Levitical one.

⁹ Schreiner, 207.

¹⁰ That's Carson's language from the talk at Union.

¹¹ Harris, 161; Schreiner, 211.

Melchizedek > Abraham
Melchizedek > Levi
Melchizedekian Priesthood > Levitical Priesthood

Verse 4: **Now observe how great this man was to whom Abraham, the patriarch, gave a tenth of the choicest spoils.** We considered last week the promises made Abraham. The Lord promised him generations of blessing (Hebrews 6:14; Gen. 12; Gen. 15). Though the Jewish Christians reading this book didn't need him to be re-introduced, verse 4 makes sure to remind us that Abraham was the patriarch. And it reminds that in Genesis 14 *he*—the father of their nation—*gave* to this other man. And he didn't give him leftovers. He gave **a tenth of the choicest spoils.** Melchizedek's superiority is seen *both* in the quality of the gift and in the significance of the one that gave it. How great must this king and priest have been?

Abraham gave a tenth to him. And what does Melchizedek do in Genesis 14? Verse 1 of chapter 7 says that he blesses Abraham. The end of verse 6 tells us that he **blessed the one who had the promises.** And then, if there's any doubt *why* the author fixates on this, he writes in verse 7: **But without any dispute the lesser is blessed by the greater.** Melchizedek is greater than Abraham. It's without a doubt, without any dispute.¹²

And that act—according to the logic of Hebrews 7—*also* means Melchizedek is greater than the Levites. The author takes a circuitous route to get there, but that's the sense of how verse 5 ends: **And those indeed of the sons of Levi who receive the priest's office have commandment in the Law to collect a tenth from the people, that is, from their brethren, although these are descended from Abraham.**

To cut this up into chewable parts, the sons of Levi were the ones that receive the priest's office. *Unlike* Melchizedek, they do so via genealogy. They are priests *because* they are the sons of Levi. But then, in verse 5, the author mentions a commandment, a commandment that's in Numbers 18. It states that they—the Levites—were to collect a tenth from the people. Who are these people they collect a tithe from? Verse 5: **their brethren.** For years and years, long after Melchizedek, the Levites collected a tenth from the Israelites.

Maybe you can see the comparison and the coming contrast. There's Melchizedek the priest. There are the Levites that serve as priests. Though in different eras, they *both* collect a tenth.

But then, to show contrast, the end of verse 5 connects the two eras. It does so by saying that the ones that gave to the Levites are descendants of the one that gave to Melchizedek.

Why make *this* connection? *If* the logic concerns who is greater, Abraham's the patriarch. In *that* sense, he's greater than his descendants. So, if Abraham is "greater" than his descendants, and Melchizedek is greater than Abraham, then Melchizedek is also greater than Abraham's descendants.

That would include *all* the Israelites, including the Levites. In fact, if you think the argument is strange thus far, listen to verse 9: **And, so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him.**

Now, before you gloss over, note that the author said, **so to speak.** Were the Levites, those appointed *years* after Moses, there in Genesis 14 paying tithes to the king of Salem, Melchizedek? Were we at Independence Hall to witness the signing of the Declaration of Independence?

However, this "so to speak" is not unlike the way the Israelites were spoken of in the Old Testament. For example, in Deuteronomy 4 the Lord spoke to the Israelites, reminding them of something in Israel's history. But when He spoke of that past event, He did so with these words,

¹² Harris, 163.

Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb (Deut. 4:10) Had those hearing the words in Deuteronomy 4 actually stood in Horeb on *that* day? No. But the Hebrew people's history was also *their* history. What *their people* had done was—so to speak—what *they* had done.¹³

That's the sense in which Hebrews 7 connects Abraham to the Levites. *His* history was theirs. Further, Levi was, **so to speak**, in Abraham's body. As such, as Abraham's descendant, Levi gave a tithe *through* him to Melchizedek.¹⁴ That's what verse 10 says.

Is this the kind of logic we'd use in our day? I'm not so sure. But this is *absolutely* the kind of argument these Jewish Christians both *needed* to hear and understood. The point of it all is this: if the Levites, "through Abraham" paid a tenth to Melchizedek, then Melchizedek's priesthood is superior to the Levitical one.¹⁵

Melchizedek > Abraham

Melchizedek > Levi

Melchizedekian Priesthood > Levitical Priesthood

But all that's merely to say it *is* superior. We must ask: how is the Melchizedekian priesthood superior?

First, it's of an entirely different order. After speaking of the Levitical priesthood, verse 6 speaks of the Melchizedekian one, **But the one whose genealogy is not traced from them collected a tenth from Abraham.** His priesthood is unique, requiring neither priestly ancestry nor succession.¹⁶ It shows us, and this is important later on, that there is a priestly line that's *not* dependent on genealogy. It's an entirely different order. And verses 4–10 have made plain it's a superior one.

How else is it superior? Verse 8 contrasts the two, first speaking of the Levitical priesthood: **In this case mortal men receive tithes, but in that case one receives them, of who it is witnessed that he lives on.** Though both priesthoods receive tithes, the Levitical line is described as made up of mortal men. What of the priesthood according to Melchizedek? **It is witnessed that he lives on.** Who witnesses to this? The Scriptures do. How? We've already seen it. Genesis 14 says nothing about Melchizedek's death. It says nothing about other priests succeeding him. The text witnesses to—testifies of—a living priesthood.¹⁷ There's a priesthood that ends. And there's a priesthood that doesn't.

That's what verse 3 pointed to: **having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually.**

3. A Melchizedekian Priest

If sometime this week you called someone over to a window to look, you didn't intend for their vision to terminate at the point of the glass pane, but to look *through* the window to the bright white beyond it. It's in something of *that* sense that we're commanded to consider Melchizedek. We're

¹³ This was Al Mohler's example in *Exalting Jesus in Hebrews*, CCE, 103.

¹⁴ Schreiner, 213.

¹⁵ Schreiner, 213.

¹⁶ William Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, WBC, 166.

¹⁷ Schreiner, 213.

instructed to look at him, but we're to do so in order that we might see Another. Melchizedek's life points forward, anticipating the type of priesthood that the Son of God would perfectly fulfill.¹⁸

As one example, His priesthood is a *royal* priesthood. As you recall, Israel's kings came from the line of Judah. We saw that in Matthew 1. On the other hand, Israel's priests came from the line of Levi. Yet in that one line from Psalm 110—which we'll look at more closely next week—David wrote that the Messiah would be *both* king and priest. As we read through the Old Testament, it's just not clear how anyone could be both. Kings come from Judah. Priests come from Levi. How is this going to be possible? Melchizedek shows us how.¹⁹

Hebrews 7 puts on display another facet of Christ's person we might miss otherwise.

Conclusion

But not *only* His person, also His work. Hebrews 7 is actually the fourth time Melchizedek has been brought up in this book. The first three times he was inserted, again, almost out of nowhere. And not unlike Genesis 14, without much explanation.

Yet, *now* that we know more about him, Hebrews 7 begins to fill out the sense of the earlier mentions. Recall how he was mentioned in chapter 5. The author was discussing the qualifications of the priest. And speaking of Christ in verse 9, the author wrote, **and having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation.** Why did the author emphasize this salvation's *eternality*? Because verse 10 says that He had been **designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.**

He was hinting at the argument to come in Hebrews 7. The Levitical priesthood—made up of *mortal* men—could not grant *eternal* salvation. *Every* priest in that priesthood died. That priesthood is the *only* kind of priesthood these Jewish Christians had categories for. So, after hinting at this in Hebrews 5, Hebrews 7 tell us *how* this better high priest became the source of *eternal* salvation. He didn't descend from Levi. He's part of a superior order, an eternal one.

We might wonder, why is that so important? What is it that He does as priest *forever*? Note another mention of Melchizedek at the close of chapter 6: **This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.**

This high priest, according to the order of Melchizedek, went where we couldn't go. Recall Psalm 24. Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in His holy place? Not us. But as a forerunner—holy, innocent, undefiled—He entered *within* the veil, on our behalf. He passed through the heavens so that we might draw near with confidence (Heb. 4). And because He's this kind of priest—a priest perpetually, *always* there—we can approach forever.

We don't assume access. But since He gave it, we avail ourselves of it. **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).

¹⁸ D. A. Carson and Greg Beale, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 967.

¹⁹ See Mitchell Chase, *40 Questions on Typology*, 131.