

# THE SUPERIORITY OF CHRIST: THE IDENTITY OF MELCHIZEDEK IN HEBREWS

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## INTRODUCTION

**F**oundational to Baptist Christology is the superiority of Christ over all created beings, and foundational to Baptist ecclesiology is the headship of Christ over the church. Among the strongest biblical passages arguing for the superiority of Christ over all created beings and particularly the Levitical priesthood is Hebrews 1-10. In Hebrews 7, Jesus is described as a priest after the order of Melchizedek, and thus prior and superior to the Aaronic priesthood. Who was this Melchizedek referenced in Hebrews 7?

Even though the Old Testament references to Melchizedek are meager, their impact is substantial. The mysterious character of Melchizedek is seen in ancient Jewish writings and in many early church fathers, as well as in more contemporary commentators and authors. The author of Hebrews uses Melchizedek to build a substantial part of his argument on the superiority of Christ. A commonly advocated view asserts that Hebrews does this since Melchizedek was a “type of Christ.” This is seen in such statements as: he had “no **recorded** beginning or close” of his life; he is “without any **recorded**” genealogy; and he is “without **recorded** father” and “without **recorded** mother.” However, other views have been advocated, even asserting that Melchizedek is much more than a mere type of Christ.

This article’s purpose is not to give detailed exegesis of all the texts related to Melchizedek. Rather, it limits its emphasis to seeking an exegetically correct identification of him. In so doing, this article focuses on an exegetical examination of key elements of the texts describing Melchizedek, distinguishing suggested identifications.

## MELCHIZEDEK IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

A brief survey of writers throughout history provides a glimpse into the variety of positions, which have been taken concerning Melchizedek’s identity. Although detailed volumes are written on this matter,<sup>2</sup> only some key writers are briefly mentioned.

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<sup>2</sup>See for examples: Fred L. Horton, Jr., *The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century A.D. and in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Cambridge UP, 1976); Bruce Demarest, *A History of Interpretation of Hebrews 7, 1-10 from the Reformation to the Present* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1976).

### Jewish Writers

#### Philo

Philo assumes the historical reality of Melchizedek as one “who had received a self-instructed and self-taught priesthood,”<sup>3</sup> but he also presents an allegorical interpretation contrasting a legitimate king with a despot, even finding the Ammonites and Moabites in Genesis 14. Philo refers to Melchizedek as the λόγος<sup>4</sup> described as the “right principle” (λόγος) and as “Reason” (λόγος). Concerning this Horton observes, “Melchizedek has as his portion the one who is. . . , since he is, in fact the Logos itself.”<sup>5</sup>

#### Qumran

Among the writings from Qumran two are relevant to this study. These are *The Genesis Apocryphon* and the *11Q Melchizedek*.

#### The Genesis Apocryphon

The Dead Sea Scroll, known as *The Genesis Apocryphon*<sup>6</sup> from the first century B.C., generally provides a literal translation of the account of Abram and Melchizedek, recognizing the former as a historical individual. However, it does not provide a particular identification of the latter.

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<sup>3</sup>Philo, “On Mating with the Preliminary Studies,” §99, *The Works of Philo Complete and Unabridged*, new updated edition, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993), 312.

<sup>4</sup>Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation*, III, § 80 and 82. The Loeb Classical Library, trans. F. H. Colson (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1956), 354.

<sup>5</sup>Fred L. Horton, Jr., *The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century A.D. and in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Cambridge UP, 1976), 57. Horton discusses Philo’s connection of Melchizedek with the Logos as follows: “The Logos is the mind of God in which the pattern of all the visible world is conceived. As such, the Logos has no visible or sensible antecedents. It is the ‘eldest’ . . . and ‘most generic’ . . . of all things. Indeed, the Logos is the ‘first-born’ . . . , the ‘shadow of God’ . . . and the ‘pattern of the image’ . . . of God in which image God made man. Melchizedek’s lack of antecedents in the priest-kingship, i.e. the fact that his priesthood is self-tutored, lends itself to Philo’s interpretation of Melchizedek as the Logos,” 59-60.

<sup>6</sup>Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave 1: A Commentary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971).

The 11Q Melchizedek

The poorly preserved fragments known as the *11Q Melchizedek* date from the early first century A.D.<sup>7</sup> After providing a full consideration of the text and its implications, Horton draws no definitive conclusion concerning who Melchizedek was: “We have just enough of the original document to tell that the author considered Melchizedek to be a superior being of some sort who will appear at the end of days to bring atonement for the sons of light and who is the direct opponent of Belial. We do not have enough of the document left to satisfy our curiosity about how the Melchizedek of Gen. xiv and Ps. cx could become such a figure. . . .”<sup>8</sup>

More definite than Horton, Fitzmyer asserts that in these fragments “Melchizedek seems to enjoy a status among or even above such heavenly beings as ‘the holy ones of God’. . . .”<sup>9</sup> Fitzmyer further declares that, “He is associated with the deliverance of divine judgment, with a day of atonement, with a year of jubilee, and with a role that exalts him high above the assembly of heavenly beings. Such associations make the comparison in Hebrews between Jesus the high priest and Melchizedek all the more intelligible.”<sup>10</sup>

Josephus

Josephus refers to Melchizedek in both *Wars of the Jews* vi.x.1 and *Antiquities of the Jews* i.x.2,<sup>11</sup> assuming he is a historical character. He also adds (in *Wars*) that Melchizedek was “the first priest of God; and first built a temple there, and called the city Jerusalem; which was formerly called Salem.” Unfortunately, Josephus does not explain what he means by the “first priest” and the “temple.”

The Rabbinic Sources

Jewish writers prior to, and contemporaneous with, New Testament times interact with the person of Melchizedek in varying ways. A similar situation occurs in Jewish writers after the New Testament was completed. Their views can be briefly summarized.

<sup>7</sup>Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition*, 73. Horton provides a reconstruction of the text and a detailed discussion concerning it.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 79.

<sup>9</sup>Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Semitic Background of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 252.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 253.

<sup>11</sup>Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (New York: Hurst & Co., n.d.).

According to the Jewish rabbi Rashi (born 1040), “The Midrash identifies him [Melchizedek] with Shem.”<sup>12</sup> The rabbis proposed that a priesthood was given to Abraham through Melchizedek (Shem) prior to the Levitical priesthood. Jewish apocalyptic “literature variously interpreted Melchizedek as a heavenly angel exercising priestly functions, as the archangel Michael himself, or as a high priest of the Messianic age who emerges alongside Elijah *redivivus*.”<sup>13</sup>

### Writers through Church History

Numerous writers throughout the history of the church have considered Melchizedek. Both early and late church writers were interested in him.

### Early Church Writers

Some church fathers refer to Melchizedek without seeking to identify him.<sup>14</sup> Other church fathers identify Melchizedek clearly as a man,<sup>15</sup> and as a type of Christ.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>A. Cohen, *The Soncino Chumash: The Five Books of Moses with Haphtaroth* (London: The Soncino Press, 1983), 69. “In Rabb. exegesis it was often conjectured that Melchizedek was another name for Shem, the son of Noah,” O. Michel, “Μελχισεδέκ,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 569. Horton observes that from “an early time Melchizedek was identified by the Rabbis with Shem, the son of Noah,” *The Melchizedek Tradition*, 114. Horton also demonstrates how this identification “had already been made by the first third of the second century A.D., as is shown by several quotations from R. Ishmael ben Elisha,” who wrote 110-135, *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>13</sup>Bruce Demarest, *A History of Interpretation of Hebrews 7, 1-10 from the Reformation to the Present* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1976), 130. With this conclusion of Demarest, Sarna concurs: “In rabbinic sources he is a righteous priest who takes his place with the Messiahs of David and Joseph and with Elijah,” Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 380. See also Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand*, 138-39, for an overall summary of rabbinic teaching on Melchizedek.

<sup>14</sup>For examples, Ignatius (ca. 50-115) uses him as an illustration of purity; *To the Philadelphians*, CD-ROM, *The Theological Journal CD*, version 2 (Garland, TX: Galaxie, 1998), 5 [quotations from the Church Fathers are all from this CD]; Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165) emphasizes that he is priest of the uncircumcision, to which the Levitical priesthood is inferior; *Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, with Trypho, a Jew*, 19; the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* (3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century), 2.6.55, asserts he is one who was instrumental in calling his generation to repentance; and Augustine (354-430) refers to him to support the Christian practice of the sacrament of The Lord’s Table, *The Letters of St. Augustin*, letter 40, 4.6; letter 75, 4.15.

<sup>15</sup>In a discussion of the exemplary worship of Abraham, Chrysostom (345-407) compares him to Melchizedek, who had a human birth: “And what of Melchizedek? Was not he also born about those times, and was so bright as to be called even a priest of God?”, *The*

While writing against a heretical sect, called the “Melchizedekians,” who glorified Melchizedek as greater than Christ, Epiphanius (ca. 315-403) identifies several views as to the identity of Melchizedek. He asserts that some considered Melchizedek as human and had identified his father and mother as “Heraclas” and “Astarth” (or “Astoriane”),<sup>17</sup> and that while he was just, holy, God’s priest, and king of Salem, “he was not of the <order> [sic] of heavenly beings, nor did he come down from heaven.”<sup>18</sup> Others, he asserts, consider Melchizedek to be “the Holy Spirit,”<sup>19</sup> or Noah’s son “Shem.”<sup>20</sup> Concerning Jewish belief, Epiphanius writes that “The Jews for their part say that Melchizedek is just and good and priest of the Most High . . . but because he is the son of a whore, they say, his mother is not mentioned in writing nor is his father known.”<sup>21</sup> Finally, Epiphanius refers to views held in the church, asserting that “at present some people have different ideas about who Melchizedek is. Some think that he is by nature the Son of God who appeared to Abraham back then in human form.”<sup>22</sup> With this view, Clement of Alexandria (died ca. 215) seems to agree in his description of Christ, our Savior: “What need is there to say that He is the only

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*Homilies on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, 26; Jerome (340-420) specifically refers to Melchizedek, “that king of Salem who, as a type of Christ, offered to Abraham bread and wine, and even then consecrated the mystery which Christians consecrate in the body and blood of the Savior.” *The Letters of St. Jerome*, letter 46; Jerome’s acceptance of Melchizedek as a type of Christ requires Melchizedek to be a man. Jerome’s letter 73 is summarized by the editor, “To Evangelus. Evangelus had sent Jerome an anonymous treatise in which Melchizedek was identified with the Holy Ghost, and had asked him what he thought of the theory. Jerome in his reply repudiates the idea as absurd and insists that Melchizedek was a real man, possibly, as the Jews said, Shem the eldest son of Noah. The date of the letter is 398 A.D.” In Jerome’s letter 73.2, “Jerome reports that Origen and Didymus regarded Melchizedek as an angel,” Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand*, 140; St. Ambrose (340-397) specifically identifies Melchizedek as a man, distinct from being any type of angelic being: “for even that Melchizedek . . . the Church certainly doth not hold to be an angel (as some Jewish triflers do), but a holy man and priest of God,” *Of the Christian Faith*, 3.11

<sup>16</sup>Some church fathers who regard Melchizedek as a “type” of Christ include: Cyprian (ca. 200-258), *The Epistles of Cyprian*, Epistle 62, and Augustine, “*On Christian Doctrine*, 4.21.

<sup>17</sup>Epiphanius, “Melchizedekians,” 55.2.1, *The Panarion of St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, Selected Passages*, trans. Philip R. Amidon (New York: Oxford UP, 1990).

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 55.4.1.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 55.5.2.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 55.6.1.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 55.7.1.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 55.7.3.

High Priest, who alone possesses the knowledge of the worship of God? He is Melchizedek, 'King of peace,' the most fit of all to head the race of men."<sup>23</sup>

*Later Church Writers*

Similar views to the above have been advocated throughout church history.<sup>24</sup> A summary of various positions held by interpreters, whether from a humanistic perspective, Protestant viewpoint, Socinian position, Roman Catholic inclination, Reformed or Arminian mindset, etc., is provided by Demarest.<sup>25</sup>

### MELCHIZEDEK IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The enigmatic Melchizedek is introduced in Genesis 14, and is also found in Psalm 110. While the New Testament book of Hebrews devotes considerable space to him and his priesthood, only these two brief texts in the Old Testament consider him.

#### Genesis 14

The appearance of Melchizedek in Genesis 14 appears abrupt. The chapter opens with Lot being taken captive by a coalition force of four kings, which attacked a coalition force of five kings from the area around Sodom and Gomorrah. Abram gathers a military contingency of his own, pursues the enemy force, defeats them in battle, and returns with the people and possessions, which had been captured. Arriving home, Abram met the king of Sodom who came out to greet him to regain the captive people. Abram returned not only the captive people but also the "goods."

In contrast to the king of the wicked city of Sodom, "Melchizedek king of Salem" also came out to meet Abram. He "was a priest of God Most High." He brought bread and wine to refresh Abram and he blessed Abram. After that blessing, Abram gave a tenth of all the spoils which he had to Melchizedek.

Melchizedek appears on the scene like a meteorite in the night sky, and disappears almost as quickly. Although there "is virtually unanimous opinion among [critical] scholars

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<sup>23</sup>Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, 2.5.

<sup>24</sup>See Erik M. Heen and Philip D. W. Krey, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament, X, Hebrews* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005, 94-109, for further quotations from church writers, including Eusebius of Caesarea (260-340), Ephrem the Syrian (306-373), Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389), Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428), Nestorius (381-451), Theodoret of Cyr (393-466), Severian of Gabala (fl. 400), Leo the Great (fl. 440-461), Bede (672-735), and Photius (820-891).

<sup>25</sup>Demarest, *A History of Interpretation of Hebrews 7, 1-10*. In addition to Demarest, a concise and yet complete historical summary of the views on Melchizedek from the early church onwards can be seen in Henry Alford, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," *The Greek Testament*, rev. Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 127-29.

that [Gen. 14] vss. 18-20 were not originally of a piece with the rest of Genesis 14,<sup>26</sup> and many speculate that Melchizedek was a Canaanite priest,<sup>27</sup> conservative scholars, who accept the integrity of Genesis, find such speculations unconvincing.<sup>28</sup> The titles of God used (14:19) testify that He is no Canaanite deity recognized by a Canaanite priest. The title “‘Most high God’ (*’el ’ehyôn*) emphasizes God’s strength and sovereignty, distinguishing Him from the gods of Canaan who were subject to the same weaknesses as their worshippers. ‘Possessor of heaven and earth’ is similar to titles used in Daniel 4.”<sup>29</sup> To these titles, Abram prefaces “LORD” (14:22), confirming that the true God is the focus here.

Sarna shows how the abruptness of Melchizedek’s introduction in Genesis 14 fits well in the narrative:

The artfulness with which the Melchizedek episode is integrated into the narrative is proven by the priest-king’s mention of Abram’s victory and by reference to the ‘Valley of the King’ (v. 17), which smooths the way for the appearance of the ‘king of Salem,’ the first element of whose name—Melchizedek—also means ‘king.’ There is a subtle contrast in the uses of the verb *y-ts-’* [יֵצֵא], ‘to go out.’ The king of Sodom ‘came out’ empty-handed to meet his benefactor, and the first word he uttered was ‘give!’ The king of Salem ‘brought out’ bread and wine and offered a blessing. . . . The name of Melchizedek’s city—Salem (Heb. *shalom*) [שָׁלֵם]—is suggestive of *shalom*, the peace that Abram’s intervention brought to the region. Finally, the extraordinary title of God used by Abram in his colloquy with the king of Sodom is the name just used twice by Melchizedek.<sup>30</sup>

Although the book of Genesis has numerous genealogical annotations, none is found concerning Melchizedek. His name is a combination of two Hebrew words, מלכי, (king) and צדק (righteousness), “king of righteousness.” He is also king of “Salem,” meaning “peace,” a word also used in Psalm 76:2 referring to Jerusalem. That Salem refers to Jerusalem is also confirmed by the reference to the “valley of Shaveh (that is, the King’s Valley)” (14:17; this valley only appears elsewhere in 2 Sam. 18:18, of the place where Absalom “set up for himself a pillar”). Josephus explicitly identifies the location: “Now

<sup>26</sup>John G. Gammie, “Loci of the Melchizedek Tradition of Genesis 14:18-20,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 90 (1971): 385-96. In contrast to Gammie, see the quotation from Sarna below concerning how the text fits well into the context of the chapter.

<sup>27</sup>Loren R. Fisher, “Abraham and his Priest-King,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 264-70)

<sup>28</sup>See Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 291-93; John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 122-23.

<sup>29</sup>John J. Davis, *Paradise to Prison: Studies in Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 181.

<sup>30</sup>Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 109.

Absalom had erected for himself a marble pillar, in the king's dale ["the King's Valley"], two furlongs distant from Jerusalem."<sup>31</sup>

From the Genesis data particular conclusions can be drawn. Since Melchizedek blessed Abram, and Abram gave a tithe to him, Melchizedek is superior to Abram. The appearance of Melchizedek at this historical event is crucial in the development of Abram's faith. Before the king of Sodom can suggest that Abram "take the goods for yourself," Melchizedek blesses Abram. "The words of this marvelous priest surely inspired the patriarch in his anticipation of the promises of God. Herein lies the strength for Abram's discernment of the Sodomite's offer: with a fresh reminder of the nature and promise of the Lord, the appeal from the pagan was shown to be nothing more than a confusing digression from the true faith."<sup>32</sup>

Following Melchizedek's blessing, Abram rejects the king of Sodom's offer (14:22-23), affirming his relationship to the Lord who provides for him. The development of Abram's faith continues in the following section of Genesis. "Because Abram avowed the sufficiency of Yahweh for himself, Yahweh appeared to him to commend him and to assure him of continued divine support. The conversation (15:1ff) forms the transition and introduction to the next section, 15:1-21:21."<sup>33</sup> Melchizedek's interaction with Abram is, therefore, an integral part of the progression of thought in Genesis, and serves as an important function in the development of Abram's faith.

### **Psalm 110**

Several crucial questions stimulate interpreters of Psalm 110, but a full discussion of all their ramifications is not the purpose of this study. A brief consideration of key elements, however, is essential since this Psalm is more frequently quoted or alluded to in the New Testament than any other.

The authorship and time frame of the Psalm<sup>34</sup> involve three primary possibilities. Some have suggested a pre-Israelite origin of the Psalm and connect it with the historical situation of the Jebusites.<sup>35</sup> Others suggest that this is a Maccabean era Psalm.<sup>36</sup> A third

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<sup>31</sup>Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 7.10.3. In addition to Josephus, the "Genesis Apocryphon (1QapGen 22:13) clearly connects Salem and Jerusalem," Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 410.

<sup>32</sup>Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 300.

<sup>33</sup>Harold G. Stigers, *A Commentary on Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 152.

<sup>34</sup>The title of the Psalm, "A Psalm of David," can be taken to mean David wrote the Psalm or that the Psalm is about David in some way.

<sup>35</sup>H. G. Jefferson, "Is Psalm 110 Canaanite?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 73 (1954): 152-56. A more comprehensive discussion of the general question of time frame and

view is that this Psalm comes from the time of David-Solomon.<sup>37</sup> The New Testament confirms this third view in that it bears abundant testimony to the Davidic authorship of the Psalm (cf. Matt. 22:43-45; Mk. 12:36-37; Lk. 20:42-44; Acts 2:34).

Assuming David is speaking, the next crucial question is: who is being addressed in the Psalm's opening words, "The LORD says to my Lord"? Again, several suggestions are made. One is that, although "this is the most messianic of all psalms as far as New Testament usage is concerned,"<sup>38</sup> David is speaking about himself as a royal priest. This means that the "royal priesthood of Jesus Christ, while ultimately traced back to Melchizedek, is most immediately modeled after that of David who himself was declared to be a priest after the order of Melchizedek and who exercised that priesthood from time to time as did his dynastic successors."<sup>39</sup> A second possibility is that David spoke this Psalm to his son Solomon, but it also contains a typological-prophetic character: "David prophetically spoke the psalm to his 'lord,' Solomon, when Solomon ascended to the Davidic throne in 971 B.C. Psalm 110 was then applied in the New Testament to Jesus Christ as the ultimate and unique Davidic King and Lord."<sup>40</sup> A third option is that the Psalm is entirely prophetic and that it "cannot address one of the kings of Israel."<sup>41</sup> Although

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authorship is found in Herbert W. Bateman, IV, "Psalm 110 and the New Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (1992): 438-53.

<sup>36</sup>M. Treves, "Two Acrostic Psalms," *Vetus Testamentum* 15 (1965): 81-90). A Jewish scholar supports this view, "Modern scholars have favoured the identification of the king with Simon Maccabee who combined the monarchy with the office of High Priest," A. Cohen, *The Psalms*, Soncino Books of the Bible (London: The Soncino Press, 1964), 371.

<sup>37</sup>Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III: 101-150*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982), 112.

<sup>38</sup>Eugene H. Merrill, "Royal Priesthood: An Old Testament Messianic Motif," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (1993), 54.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 61. Merrill exerts much energy attempting to demonstrate that David legitimately exercised the rights of priesthood. A similar view that the Psalm referred to Hezekiah exercising priestly rights was discussed and rejected by the church fathers Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165), *Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, with Trypho, a Jew*, 33, and Tertullian (ca. 160-220), *The Five Books Against Marcion*, 5.9.

<sup>40</sup>Bateman, "Psalm 110 and the New Testament," 453.

<sup>41</sup>M. J. Paul, "The Order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4 and Heb. 7:3)," *Westminster Theological Journal* (1987), 200. Paul refers to R. de Vaux [Les institutions de l'Ancient Testament (2 vols.; Paris: Cerf, 1958, 1960), 1.175], and writes that Vaux "sums up priestly actions of the kings, but he says that this evidence does not necessarily prove that the king himself was a priest. He only had to fulfill certain priestly functions in exceptional circumstances," 200.

the issues are numerous, the third option seems best.<sup>42</sup> “Jesus’ application to Himself of Psalm 110, in which the messianic king was also a priestly figure after the order of Melchizedek, points unmistakably [sic] to His self-consciousness as the eschatological high priest (Mark 12:35-37).”<sup>43</sup> “Ps. 110:4 proves that with him [Melchizedek] there begins a new order (τάξις) which cannot be combined with the Aaronic priesthood.”<sup>44</sup> The writer of Hebrews seems to accept this view in his first reference in 1:13, and again in 5:5-10. “In Heb 5 the author applies this verse of Ps 110 to Jesus, undoubtedly understanding it as messianic. . . . Having first introduced Ps 2:7 to establish the risen Jesus as the possessor of *regal* inheritance, he adds Ps 110:4 to present the Kingly Son of God as one appointed also to an *eternal priesthood*.”<sup>45</sup> The quotation in chapter 5 is, therefore, designed to prepare the way for the lengthy discussion of Melchizedek in chapter 7. To that discussion attention is now turned.

### MELCHIZEDEK IN HEBREWS 7

Grasping the general flow of the argument of the book of Hebrews is crucial to understanding how chapter seven furthers the writer’s thought. The overall theme of the book of Hebrews is that Christ is superior, and chapter 7 occurs in the first major division of the book (1:1-10:18) where that theme is especially emphasized.

#### Argument of Hebrews

Hebrews 1:1-10:18 enunciates the superiority of Christ. He is first of all superior to the prophets (1:1-4), then superior to angels (1:5-2:18), superior to Moses (3:1-4:13), and finally to the Aaronic priesthood (4:14-10:18).

The author of Hebrews shows that Christ is superior to angels as Son (1:5-6), King (1:7-9), Creator (1:10-12), and Ruler (1:13-14). Psalm 110 is quoted in Hebrews 1:13 to show that Christ is superior to the angels as Ruler since God never said to any angel, “Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.” Following a warning not to drift from the superior Christ (2:1-4), the author demonstrates that Christ’s superiority over angels is proved by His sovereignty (2:5-9) and His salvation (2:10-18).

The argument of Hebrews continues by emphasizing the superiority of Christ to Moses (3:1-4:13). Christ is shown to be superior in His person and work (3:1-4), and superior in His position (3:5-6). Next, the writer again issues a warning, this time against

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<sup>42</sup>See also Elliott E. Johnson, “Hermeneutical Principles and the Interpretation of Psalm 110,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (1992): 428-37.

<sup>43</sup>Alex T. M. Cheung, “The Priest as the Redeemed Man: A Biblical-Theological Study of the Priesthood,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29 (September 1986), 271.

<sup>44</sup>Michel, “Μελχισεδέκ,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, 570.

<sup>45</sup>Fitzmyer, *Semitic Background*, 225.

disbelief of the superior Christ (3:7-4:13), by stressing that faith is a condition of blessing (3:7-19) and that there is a promised rest (4:1-13).

The flow of thought in the book now turns to a detailed presentation showing the superiority of Christ to the Aaronic priesthood (4:14-10:18). This section opens with an emphasis on Christ being superior in His glorious position (4:14-5:10) because He is a heavenly High Priest (4:14), a helpful High Priest (4:15-16), in contrast to the human high priests (5:1-4), a heavenly-ordained High Priest (5:5-6), and a perfected High Priest (5:7-10). A third warning is then given to the readers against degeneration from the superior Christ (5:11-6:20). Following that warning, the writer resumes his emphasis by asserting the superiority of Christ in His priesthood (7:1-28), giving first the characteristics of Melchizedek (7:1-3), and the superior priesthood of Melchizedek (7:4-10). Christ is shown to be a perfect High Priest (7:11-28), in contrast to the imperfection of the Levitical priesthood (7:11-19), because His is a better priesthood (7:20-25), and He is the absolute High Priest (7:26-28).

The author of Hebrews continues to emphasize the superiority of Christ to the Aaronic priesthood by showing that He is superior in His new sanctuary (8:1-5), superior in His new covenant (8:6-13), superior in His atonement (9:1-28), as he contrasts the atonement of the old covenant (9:1-10) with that of the new covenant (9:11-28), and superior in His sacrifice (10:1-18), as he shows the weakness of the old sacrifices (10:1-4), the efficacy of the new sacrifice (10:5-10), the inability of the Aaronic priests (10:11), the sufficiency of Christ (10:12-14), and the completion of salvation (10:15-18).

## SUPERIOR IN HIS PRIESTHOOD (HEBREWS 7)

### The Characteristics of Melchizedek (7:1-3)

The overall purpose of chapter 7 is to demonstrate the royal supremacy of Christ in His priesthood, which is “according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 5:10), and which is “hard to explain” (5:11). The emphasis on Christ being “according to the order of Melchizedek” is repeated in 6:20, and 7:17. In each occurrence the connection is with the priesthood, emphasizing that Christ did not receive His priesthood from any natural descent but on the basis of an oath (see Heb. 7:21). In 6:20, in particular, the phrase is specifically connected with Christ’s work of salvation, “where the Melchizedekian priesthood is predicated of Jesus just as he enters the inner (heavenly) sanctuary as ‘forerunner on our behalf.’”<sup>46</sup>

“The interests of the author in the Melchizedek tradition become clear in vii 1-3, where the author brings together those features of Genesis xiv 18-20 and Psalm cx 4 which are useful for his claim that Melchizedek is a divine figure.”<sup>47</sup> In Hebrews 7:1-3 the pattern of His priesthood is set forth; in 7:4-10 the pre-eminence of His priesthood is stressed. The

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<sup>46</sup>Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand*, 145-46.

<sup>47</sup>James W. Thompson, “The Conceptual Background and Purpose of the Midrash in Hebrews VII,” *Novum Testamentum* 19 (July 1977), 211.

perfection of His priesthood is detailed in 7:11-28. In 7:1-10 the writer of Hebrews “uses the incident of Melchizedek’s meeting with Abraham to show the priority of Melchizedek over the Levitical priests. The comparison is primary to the demonstration in 7:11-28 that the priest ‘like Melchizedek’ is superior to the Levitical priests.”<sup>48</sup>

*Melchizedek’s Qualities of Being*

The writer of Hebrews presents specific characteristics of Melchizedek as he draws from the accounts of Genesis 14 and Psalm 110 in this text. Melchizedek is “king of Salem,” which Psalm 76:2 identifies as Jerusalem.<sup>49</sup> As “king of Salem,” Melchizedek is a royal figure. He is also “priest of the Most High God.” This priestly figure serves the Lord who is “possessor of heaven and earth” (Gen. 14:19). This Melchizedek met Abraham and blessed him, and by that act of giving a blessing Melchizedek “at once assumed the position of a superior”<sup>50</sup> over Abraham (Heb. 7:7). This is a crucial point since Jewish people claimed Abraham as their spiritual father (cf. John 8:33, 39), but here is one obviously superior to Abraham. To Melchizedek Abraham gave “a tenth part of all” (Heb. 7:2) and in so doing Abraham assumed the position of the inferior, willingly acknowledging the superiority of Melchizedek.

The writer of Hebrews proceeds to interpret the Genesis narrative for his readers. Melchizedek is “by the translation of *his name*, king of righteousness” (Heb. 7:2). Significantly, this emphasis on righteousness occurs first. This is what Melchizedek is stated to **be**, not what he is merely called. Melchizedek is one whose character is specifically characterized by righteousness (cf. Isa. 32:1, 15). Furthermore, he is “king of Salem, which is king of peace” (7:2). Again, this is the characteristic of the person (cf. Isa. 9:7, which also includes “righteousness”)<sup>51</sup>. “His personal name and the name of his city are taken to correspond with the actual traits of his character.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 163.

<sup>49</sup>Some interpreters debate the issue of whether “Salem” refers to Jerusalem or to some other location, such as Shechem. The writer of Hebrews does not enter that debate, but merely states the fact that Melchizedek is king of Salem.

<sup>50</sup>Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 171.

<sup>51</sup>“The writer may have recognized in Melchizedek’s character as ‘king of righteousness’ and ‘king of peace’ a prefiguration of the promised Messiah. . . , but nothing is made of these notions,” Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 164.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 172.

*Melchizedek's Lack of Ancestry*

The author next describes Melchizedek with the crucial terms, “without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life” (Heb. 7:3), and later as one who has “the power of an indestructible life” (Heb. 7:16). Concerning these descriptions a multitude of pages has been written. Many interpreters advocate that this merely means there is no **record** of his parents, of his ancestry, of his birth, or of his death, given in the Old Testament; this is stated to set up a contrast to the Levitical system where the emphasis was on the priest’s pedigree.<sup>53</sup> An examination of the terminology, however, points in a different direction, which Ellingworth acknowledges: “The following words suggest that the pre-Christian hymn [which is how he takes this text’s background] was concerned with the eternal, and therefore no doubt heavenly, origin of Melchizedek. This cannot be excluded from the thought of the author of Hebrews. . . .”<sup>54</sup> The third verse reads, ἀπάτωρ, ἀμήτωρ, ἀγενεαλόγητος, μήτε ἀρχὴν ἡμερῶν μήτε ζωῆς τέλος ἔχων.

The word translated “without genealogy” is ἀγενεαλόγητος. It occurs only here in the NT, and outside the NT is found only in reference to this passage.<sup>55</sup> It means simply, “without genealogy,” and may have been coined by the author of Hebrews.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Kent, for example, asserts that this “does not mean that he had no human parents, but rather that so far as the record goes these were absent,” Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 126. Likewise Kistemaker writes, “We ought not take this verse [7:3] literally, for the author, reasoning from silence (Gen. 14:18-20), is comparing Melchizedek with the priests who descended from Aaron,” Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 185.

<sup>54</sup>Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 358. Attridge agrees: “The poetic epithets used here do not simply describe the fact of which scripture is silent. They also evoke an image of eternity and transcendence.” Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, *Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 190.

<sup>55</sup>Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., rev. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 9.

<sup>56</sup>It is around this term that much of the discussion concerning Melchizedek’s identity hinges, whether he is a mere man or the preincarnate Christ: “These diametrically opposed points of view concerning the writer’s intention reflect different estimates of the element in v 3 that is crucial. According to the first approach [preincarnate Christ view], the crucial statement is v. 3b (‘having neither beginning of days nor end of life’), which indicates that the writer is developing a hellenistic [sic] mythological [this present writer does not accept that Hebrews uses a ‘mythological’ approach] concept of a supra-human figure endowed with a mysterious heavenly origin. According to the second approach, the

Some interpreters have observed that the words “without father” and “without mother” are “used in Greek for waifs of unknown parentage, for illegitimate children, for people who came from unimportant families, and sometimes for deities who were supposed to take their origin from one sex only. . . . When nothing is recorded of the parentage of this man [Melchizedek], it is not necessarily to be assumed that he had no parents but simply that the absence of the record is significant.”<sup>57</sup> That statement has correct elements in it, but it also overstates the case. It functions with the assumption that the words appear in Greek contexts which exactly parallel the context of Hebrews 7, and therefore what is occurring in that type of Greek literature also occurs in the book of Hebrews. However, such is not the case.<sup>58</sup> In those occurrences in other Greek literature the contexts of the uses consistently identify that the words are used in what is not a technically literal sense. A few examples will illustrate this.

The Greek playwright Sophocles (died 406 B.C.) uses “without father” (ἀπάτωρ) in his play *Trachiniae*. However, the context is clear that the women referred to as “fatherless” do indeed have fathers, perhaps “free-born sires.”

And a strange pity hath come o'er me, friends,  
At sight of these poor wretches, motherless,  
Fatherless, homeless, in an alien land,  
Daughters, it well may be, of free-born sires,  
And now condemned to live the life of slaves.<sup>59</sup>

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significant element is the third term in v 3a (“without genealogy”), in the light of which the other declarations are to be interpreted.” Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 165.

<sup>57</sup>Leon Morris, “Hebrews,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 63.

<sup>58</sup>“The context makes it clear that the author does not use ἀπάτωρ and ἀμήτωρ in the pejorative sense of ‘orphan’ or ‘illegitimate child,’ as was common in Judaism. Rather the terms carry the meaning of the divine being of Hellenism. Cf. Euripides, *Ion*. 109; Plato, *Symp* 180d.” James W. Thompson, “The Conceptual Background . . . Hebrews VII,” 212, fn. 12. See also Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2001), who cogently states: “When papyri give a person’s name followed by ‘father unknown’ (*apatōr*). . . , the implication is that the person is illegitimate. . . . A person with ‘no mother, no father’ would be a foundling, an orphan. . . , or an illegitimate child,” 342. This is not at all consistent with Hebrews.

<sup>59</sup>Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 298-302, trans. F. Storr, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1961). Sophocles uses “without mother” in a similar way, clearly identifying “That mother, mother none, Whose crimes, as oft thou gav’st me secret word, Thou wouldst thyself speedily avenge,” Sophocles, *Electra* 1154-1156, trans. F. Storr, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1961). See also Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1383, trans. F. Storr, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962), where Oedipus disowns his son in similar language.

The Greek essayist and biographer Plutarch (A.D. 46?-120) also used the term “without father” (ἀπάτωρ) in his discussion of various Roman questions in his *Moralia*. One question was, “Why do they call children of unknown fathers *spurii*?” The term “unknown fathers” is then discussed at some length with the context making it abundantly clear that these descriptions “denote children of unknown fathers . . . that is ‘without a father.’”<sup>60</sup> Clearly this context does not refer literally to a person without a father.

The Greek philosopher Plato (427-347 B.C.) shows the same use of the word in his *Laws*. When discussing the possibility of “differences greater than is right” between fathers and sons, he shows that the outcome of these differences may result in fathers publicly proclaiming “that their sons have legally ceased to be their sons,” and a result of that is that the “fatherless man” (ἀπάτωρ) should emigrate to another State.<sup>61</sup> Once again, the context is quite clear that this is not a man with no literal father.

Close examination of the use of the words ἀπάτωρ<sup>62</sup> and ἀμήτωρ<sup>63</sup> in Greek literature demonstrates that the terms are not used at all in the same sense as that of the book of Hebrews when referring to ordinary individuals. Indeed, the book of Hebrews specifically sets Melchizedek in contrast to ordinary individuals. The writer of Hebrews presents nothing in his context to minimize the full and literal significance of the involved terms.

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<sup>60</sup>Plutarch, *Moralia* 2.288E, trans. Frank Cole Babitt, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962).

<sup>61</sup>Plato, *Laws* 929a, trans. R. G. Bury, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1961). For additional examples of this same type of occurrence concerning ἀπατωρ, see: Euripides, *Iphigeneia in Taurica* 864, trans. Arthur S. Way, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958); Euripides, *The Madness of Hercules* 114, trans. Arthur S. Way, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1952). For examples of this same type of occurrence concerning ἀμήτωρ (see Euripides, *Ion* 109, trans. Arthur S. Way, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958); Herodotus, *The Persian Wars* 4.154, trans. George Rawlinson (New York: Random House, 1942).

<sup>62</sup>See Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 99; Gottlob Schrenk, “ἀπάτωρ,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 1019-20; and Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. Henry Stuart Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 181, for additional extra-biblical uses of the word.

<sup>63</sup>See Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 54; and Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 82 for additional extra-biblical uses of the word.

How such terms are used when referring to deities must now be considered. The significance of this kind of usage was investigated in detail by Neyrey.<sup>64</sup> His thesis is that true gods are described in the Hellenistic literature with the same kinds of descriptive words which are used in the book of Hebrews. He provides a summary of the various terms which convey the concepts of “Eternal in the Past/Imperishable in the Future,” “Remains Forever,” and “Without Father or Mother or Genealogy.” He concludes that “evidence from ancient Greek sources” demonstrate that “it belongs to a true deity to be both ‘without father’ and ‘without mother.’”<sup>65</sup> Concerning Melchizedek he avers that “he is presented in terms used to describe a deity,” but that this emphasis “is not to exalt Melchizedek for his own sake, but to promote Jesus: ‘. . . resembling the Son of God’ (7:3).”<sup>66</sup> Neyrey’s study demonstrates that “Unmistakably, the author of Hebrews intends his readers to understand the figure described in 7:3 as a true deity, completely in accord with the *topoi* which describe true gods as fully eternal, uncreated or ungenerated in the past, and imperishable in the future.”<sup>67</sup>

### Melchizedek’s Eternality

In addition to the foregoing descriptions of Melchizedek, the writer of Hebrews explicitly states that Melchizedek is one “having neither beginning of days nor end of life.” Again, many interpreters advocate this means only that the Old Testament record is silent about his birth and death.<sup>68</sup> A critical element to observe, however, is that the word “having” (ἔχων) is in the present tense, stressing continuous action. This participle goes with both the “beginning of days” and the “end of life.” The text stresses that Melchizedek is presently having no beginning nor end. He is eternal. This stands in marked contrast to the situation of Aaron whose death is given in detail in the Old Testament (Num. 20:22-29).

As the argument proceeds, Melchizedek is asserted to be “made like the Son of God.” The verb translated “made like” is ἀφομοιωμένος, a perfect passive participle (“having been made like”), the compound form causing it to be emphatic.<sup>69</sup> Interpreters

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<sup>64</sup>Jerome H. Neyrey, “‘Without Beginning of Days or End of Life’ (Hebrews 7:3): Topos for a True Deity,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991): 439-55.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 447.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 448.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 454.

<sup>68</sup>In contrast, Thompson considers that “The next phrase, μήτε ἀρχὴν ἡμερῶν μήτε ζωῆς τέλος ἔχων accents the eternity of Melchizedek and is an appropriate transition to vii 3d. That which is divine (ἀπάτωρ, ἀμήτωρ) is eternal.” James W. Thompson, “The Conceptual Background . . . Hebrews VII,” 213.

<sup>69</sup>This verb occurs only here in the NT. For a survey of its use in extrabiblical literature, see J. Schneider, “ἀφομοιῶ,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard

who advocate that Melchizedek is a type of Christ, commonly state that this means he is like the Son of God because of the statements given and the information which is withheld concerning him in the Old Testament.<sup>70</sup> However, another approach to the text is preferable. The title “Son of God” is crucial in this context since it points to the eternal nature of Christ. The “Son of God” (that is, Christ in His deity) had no father, mother, genealogy, birth, or death.”<sup>71</sup> However, the “Son of Man” (that is, Jesus in His humanity; observe that the actual name “Jesus” does not occur in chapter 7 until 7:22) did have a mother (no earthly father), genealogy, birth, and death. Hebrews 7 stresses that Melchizedek is a human representation of the Divine Son of God. Although Bruce considers Melchizedek to be a human type of Christ, he yet makes a pertinent observation on this thought: “It is the eternal being of the Son of God that is here in view, not His human life.”<sup>72</sup> The word translated “made like” means “to produce a facsimile or copy.”<sup>73</sup> A facsimile is an exact copy. Prior to His incarnation, the Son of God did appear to men in the Old Testament in human representations (Christophany, or Theophany), which were exact representations of Him. Taking the words of Hebrews 7 at their face value, Melchizedek is a Christophany.<sup>74</sup>

The next emphasis is that Melchizedek “remains a priest continually.” Some interpreters state that this merely **assumes** he is alive for the sake of the argument in this passage. Others argue that this means the Bible **record** is silent as to any interruption of the priestly office. The verb used here, “remains” (μένω), occurs in the book of Hebrews in 7:3,

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Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 198.

<sup>70</sup>MacArthur, for example, writes that “Melchizedek is described as **made like** the Son of God (7:3), not as *being* the Son of God. I believe that Melchizedek was a historical human being, whose priestly ministry typifies that of Christ [emphasis his],” John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 173.

<sup>71</sup>Morris recognizes this as he observes that the “writer is, of course, speaking of the Son’s eternal nature, not of his appearance in the Incarnation,” “Hebrews,” 64.

<sup>72</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 138.

<sup>73</sup>Archibald Thomas Robertson, “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 1932 (Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.), 381. Interestingly, Robertson states that Melchizedek is a normal man, and that the “likeness is in the picture drawn in Genesis, not in the man himself,” 381. In contrast, however, the text of Hebrews directly states that “this Melchizedek” (7:1) is the one involved, the man himself.

<sup>74</sup>Bruce also quotes J. B. McCaul: “Cunaeus . . . believes, as Ewald does, and I do, that Melchizedek was the second person in the Ever Blessed Trinity, the Divine *angel of the Lord*, who continually appeared to the Fathers under the Old Testament dispensation . . . if Melchizedek was ‘without beginning of days or end of life’, but ‘abideth a priest continually’, how can it be believed of him that he was a mere mortal? . . . Melchizedek, as the Divine *Logos*, existed from eternity’ (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* [London 1871], pp. 75, 80),” 137.

24; 10:34; 12:27; 13:1, 14, and the related verb διαμένω is found in 1:11. The consistent emphasis found in all the references is to heavenly certainties, such as to the eternity of God (1:11), the eternal possession as believers (10:34), the unshaken realities of God (12:27), the continuing love of brethren (13:1), and the eternal city of God (13:14). The text of Hebrews likewise asserts the heavenly certainty that Melchizedek “remains” a priest.<sup>75</sup>

The text further asserts that the remaining is continuous, εἰς τὸ διηκεές. The adjective διηκεές is only used in the New Testament in the book of Hebrews (here and in 10:1, 12, 14). By using this term, the writer of Hebrews is stating categorically that Melchizedek is eternal in his being. This term is “here synonymous with εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα of Ps. 110:4 (LXX 109:4, for Heb. *le-’olām*). The adjective διηκεές is classical from Homer onwards.”<sup>76</sup>

A significant question arises at this juncture. If Melchizedek actually was a pre-incarnate appearing of the Son of God, then how can Christ be a priest after his order? Does this not make Christ a priest after the order of Christ? The answer is that in Hebrews 7 the writer deals with Christ as both the Son of God (deity) and the Son of Man (humanity). When the Son of God became incarnate, this did not alter the nature of the character of His priesthood. The God-Man still maintains the same priesthood that He had before He became man, and that priesthood is superior in every respect to Aaron’s.

### **The Superior Priesthood of Melchizedek (7:4-10)**

This section commences with a statement concerning the general superiority of Melchizedek (7:4). The word translated “Now observe” (from θεωρέω) speaks of a critical, discriminating inspection, so that you “come to an understanding of”<sup>77</sup> something. In classical times the word was used “for the military sense ‘to muster, to review.’”<sup>78</sup> What the writer wants understood is that “this man” (Melchizedek) was “great” (πηλίκος), of “extraordinary importance,”<sup>79</sup> a word which indicates magnitude in dimension. To this man, Abraham gave “a tenth,” which is significant because Abraham was the “patriarch” (the “first father”) of the Jewish nation, the progenitor of the Hebrew race, but Melchizedek is obviously superior to Abraham.

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<sup>75</sup>Lane acknowledges that the verb “abides” (μένει) “evokes the notion of eternity, in an eschatological sense,” *Hebrews 1-8*, 167.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 133.

<sup>77</sup>Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 454.

<sup>78</sup>Wilhelm Michaelis, qewre,w, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 319.

<sup>79</sup>Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 811.

Following this statement of general superiority, the writer of Hebrews next presents a more detailed superiority of Melchizedek (7:5-10). This detailed superiority is evidenced in respect of receiving tithes (7:5-6a), in respect of blessing (7:6b-7), in respect of life (7:8), and in respect of Levi (7:9-10).

Concerning tithes (7:5-6a), some “of the sons of Levi” received tithes. Not all the sons of Levi became priests; only those sons who descended through Aaron became such. They received “the priest’s office” from God, through his appointment. The Law commanded them to collect the “tenth from the people” because the tithe belonged to God (Lev. 27:30). The priests received the tithe because they represented God to Israel (Num. 18:21, 26). These priests significantly had the same basic descent as the other Israelites; they were “brethren.” The priests did not receive tithes because they were superior to other Israelites, but because the Law commanded it. Only the Law gave the Levitical priests authority to receive tithes. However, in complete contrast, Melchizedek received tithes from Abraham. Melchizedek’s claim is not based on any Law, nor on any genealogy. Rather, Melchizedek’s claim is based on his inherent character, so he is superior. Melchizedek “collected” the tithe from Abraham, the verb being in the perfect tense to indicate that Abraham never did anything to invalidate this act—its results continue.

A comment concerning the phrase “the one whose genealogy is not traced from them” (Heb. 7:6) is necessary. Some suggest that this phrase asserts that Melchizedek actually did have a genealogy, and that the writer of Hebrews here acknowledges this fact, while in 7:3 he had minimized it for purpose of his argument.<sup>80</sup> However, this misses the overall argument of the context. The quotation from Psalm 110:4 shows that “there exists an authentic priesthood independent of Aaron’s to which only persons who never die may belong. Since Jesus is eternal he may belong. But *must* he? Yes, because the psalm oracle is meant for him (7:13). . . . Melchizedek, having no parents at all, had no genealogy to qualify him. Despite his descent from Judah (7:14), Jesus too is *agenealogētos* in the sense most important for this author: his claim to priesthood does not rest on a family tree. For this epistle’s author, the meaning of Ps 110:4 was fundamentally ‘You are a priest because—like Melchizedek—you are forever.’”<sup>81</sup>

Having set forth that Melchizedek is superior in respect to receiving tithes, the author of Hebrews continues to show his superiority in respect to blessing (7:6b-7). Since Abraham received Divine promises before he met Melchizedek, a reader could think that Abraham was above being blessed, that he should be the one giving the blessing. However, Melchizedek blessed Abraham, so Melchizedek is superior. The verb “is blessed” is in the perfect tense, pointing to the lasting significance of that historic event. The inescapable conclusion, “without any dispute,” is that the lesser (Abraham) is blessed by the “greater” (Melchizedek).

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<sup>80</sup>“Now we can read v. 6 in such a way that Melchizedek did have a genealogy although not the required one.” M. J. Paul, “The Order of Melchizedek,” 199.

<sup>81</sup>Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand*, 147.

Having presented his case that Melchizedek is superior in respect to receiving tithes (7:5-6a), and in respect to blessing (7:6b-7), the writer of Hebrews continues to show his superiority in respect to this life (7:8). The words translated “In this case” (ὧδε μὲν) have the idea of “here on one hand,” in this life. The stress is on what had been established on earth for men to do while alive. In this case, men were appointed to “receive tithes,” a practice that the writer assumes is still being practiced at the time of this book. The Levites under Mosaic Law received tithes, and were mortal men who died from generation to generation. Yet, the word “receive” indicates a present, continuous action; tithes were still being received in Judaism until the temple’s destruction in A.D. 70.<sup>82</sup>

In contrast to “in this case,” the writer now states “in that case” (ἐκεῖ δέ), or “there on the other hand,” meaning there in the case of Melchizedek. To Melchizedek “it is witnessed that he lives on.” The verb “it is witnessed” (μαρτυρούμενος) is again present tense, showing continuous action. While some commentators, such as Bruce, say the words “it is witnessed that he lives on” are to be taken “in the sense that we never read of him otherwise than as a living man,”<sup>83</sup> the wording of the text shows that Melchizedek is considered to still be living when the writer penned his words (about A.D. 68). Ellingworth concurs, “The implied statement ‘scripture says that Melchizedek is (still) alive’ points in two directions: backwards to the argument from scripture’s silence about his death . . . , and forwards to the key text Ps. 110:4. . . . The argument is . . . the more specific one that Melchizedek (like Enoch, 11:5) did not die.”<sup>84</sup> Although Kistemaker assumes that Melchizedek is only a normal man, he nonetheless admits the force of this text: “The exact wording is that Melchizedek ‘is declared to be living.’ Does this mean that Melchizedek never died? If he were a supernatural being, he would be the Son of God.”<sup>85</sup> That is exactly the assertion of the writer of Hebrews.<sup>86</sup> Melchizedek is considered to be receiving tithes presently because he is still living. Therefore, he is superior.

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<sup>82</sup>Significantly, the author argues for doing away with the Mosaic system in general, but he does not say that tithing should cease, and this context would be a perfect place to do so, if God intended to do away with tithing at this time in the Church.

<sup>83</sup>Bruce, *Hebrews*, 142.

<sup>84</sup>Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 368. Ellingworth also states that the “conclusion that ‘the author believed that Melchizedek was a christophany’ . . . is tempting but unprovable; it is in line with other expressions in the epistle which suggest, not only Christ’s pre-existence (e.g. 1:2c), but also anticipations of his work in OT times (e.g., 3:5; 4:2; 11:26, and possibly 12:25),” 351.

<sup>85</sup>Kistemaker, *Hebrews*, 189.

<sup>86</sup>Attridge asserts that there is “something suspicious about our author’s reticence and, particularly when he refers to the ‘life’ that Melchizedek is attested as possessing (vs 8), he presses literary observations to the breaking point. His argument there makes little sense if the Melchizedek whom Abraham encountered were not greater than the patriarch precisely because of the unlimited life attributed to him. It seems likely, then, that his exposition of Gen 14 is not simply an application to a figure of the Old Testament of

Now that the writer has presented his case that Melchizedek is superior in respect to receiving tithes (7:5-6a), in respect to blessing (7:6b-7), and in respect to this life (7:8), he concludes by showing his superiority in respect to Levi (7:9-10). A Jewish reader of the book of Hebrews may have thought that since Abraham was not a priest, then the flow of argument really does not apply to the Levitical priesthood; that anticipated objection is now answered. The phrase “And, so to speak” (which occurs only here in the NT), is used to introduce an unusual statement. Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek through the intermediate agency of Abraham. This was because Abraham was his physical forefather; there is a genuine unity in humanity. This was also because the Divine promises were given to Abraham, which included full development for all Israel, fully incorporating Levi. This point subjects any Levitical priesthood to the priesthood of Melchizedek; therefore, Melchizedek is indeed superior.

Space does not permit a full discussion of Hebrews 7:11-28. However, this passage consistently goes on to explain the perfection by the perfect priest, that is, Jesus Christ. The imperfection of the Levitical priesthood (7:11-19) is because it was transitory (7:11-14) and because it was temporal (7:15-19). That is contrasted to the better priesthood in Christ (7:20-25), which is given dignity by God’s oath (7:20-22), and which maintains eternity by Christ’s life (7:23-25). This culminates in the fact that Christ is the absolute High Priest (7:26-28) as shown by his personal traits (7:26), His high priestly work (7:27) and His superiority to the Levitical order (7:28).

## CONCLUSION

This article considers the identity of one of the most enigmatic individuals of Scripture, Melchizedek. Although only introduced briefly in Genesis 14 and referred to succinctly in Psalm 110, the writer of Hebrews makes him an integral part of his argument that Christ in His priestly character is superior to the Aaronic priesthood because He is “according to the order of Melchizedek.”

Ancient Jewish opinions, as well as the views of Christian writers throughout history, accord with the continuing debate as to the identity of Melchizedek. Many interpreters regard him as a man, perhaps a Canaanite priest-king, who is regarded by the writer of Hebrews as a type of Christ. Another possibility, however, seems to be more in accord with the plain sense of the text of Hebrews: Melchizedek is an appearance of the preincarnate Christ. This strengthens even more the superiority of Christ over the Aaronic priesthood and advances the argument of the book of Hebrews to a crescendo worthy of the space given to it.

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attributes proper to Christ, but is based upon . . . the figure of Melchizedek as a divine or heavenly being.” *Hebrews*, 191-92.