

**“Like the Son of God”:
Form and Content in Hebrews 7,1-10**

Exploration of the Melchizedek theme in Hebrews has proceeded in recent years along two main lines, neither of which may be said to have reached a wholly satisfactory conclusion. The first is primarily concerned with the literary criticism of Heb 7,1-3⁽¹⁾; the second with the status of Melchizedek, and especially with his relation to Christ⁽²⁾.

The purpose of this note is to suggest that the literary and theological questions may throw light on one another; in other words, that the theological significance of Melchizedek for the author of Hebrews may be better assessed if we can see more clearly where the author is speaking on his own initiative, and where he is responding to external pressure.

The *theological problem* is essentially that stated long ago by Tholuck: “Is Melchizedek, for the author of Hebrews, alongside Christ or subordinate to him?”⁽³⁾ The problem becomes all the more puzzling when one observes Hebrews’ generally careful style and composition, and in particular, the pattern of its use of the Old Testament.

Discussion of Old Testament themes in Hebrews is generally marked by a combination of positive and negative elements. On the one hand, there are comparisons which indicate similarities with the new, Christian dispensation; on the other hand, there are contrasts between the two. The relative weight of comparison and contrast varies from place to place, with a general tendency for positive elements to predominate in paraenetic passages, and negative elements in doctrinal passages. As Graham Hughes has put it:

... In the theologically oriented passages... the discontinuity with the old covenant is written large; in the exhortatory passages... the continuity between old and new covenants is such that one might almost think the Christian era had never dawned⁽⁴⁾.

⁽¹⁾ The fullest recent survey is by H. ZIMMERMANN, *Das Bekenntnis der Hoffnung* (BBB 46; Cologne - Bonn 1977) 80-99.

⁽²⁾ See especially F. J. HORTON, jr.; *The Melchizedek Tradition* (SNTSMS 30; Cambridge, U.K. 1976) 152-172. P. J. KOBELSKI, *Melchizedek and Melchireša* (Washington, D.C. 1981) 115-129 covers both the literary-critical and the exegetical-theological aspects, but without relating them closely to one another.

⁽³⁾ A. THOLUCK, *Kommentar zum Briefe an die Hebräer* (Hamburg 1836); *A Commentary of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh 1842) *ad loc.*

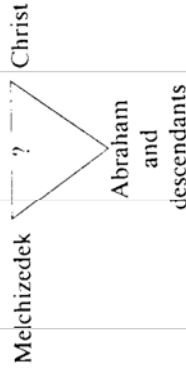
⁽⁴⁾ G. HUGHES, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics* (SNTSMS 36; Cambridge, U.K. 1979) 70.

In paraenetic passages such as 2,1-3; 4,2; 10,28-29; 12,25-26; cf. 11,39-40, the terms of the comparison are God's one people in past and present, so the continuity between them is duly emphasised. In doctrinal passages, where Old Testament individuals or institutions are contrasted with Christ and the new covenant, positive elements of comparison serve largely to establish a *tertium comparationis* in beliefs and assumptions shared by the author and his readers.

For example, in the discussion of Jesus and Moses (3,2-5), comparison is almost entirely confined to v. 2 (παιδόν... ὡς καὶ Μωϋσῆς), while contrast predominates in the rest of the passage (πλείονος... οὐτος δοξῆς παρὰ Μωϋσῆς ἤϊωται... v. 3; Μωϋσῆς μὲν... /Χριστὸς δέ... vv. 5-6). In other such comparisons, despite variation in detail, the same basic pattern is followed either in the immediate or in the wider context: comparison provides a foundation for contrast, but it is the contrast which matters. In chapter 1, the element of comparison is reduced to the fact that God speaks both to the Son, and collectively to the angels, in order to assign appropriate titles, status, and functions. In chapter 5, positive comparison between Christ and levitical high priests is sustained as far as v. 5 (πᾶς... ἰψχιερέως /οὐτως καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς, vv. 1-5); but when the author finally returns to this theme in chapter 8, it is to make even more emphatic contrastive statements about the superiority of the new, "more excellent" (8,6) covenant, as opposed to the inadequacy (8,7) and obsolescence (8,12) of the old.

The pattern is repeated in the following chapters: Old Testament liturgical objects (9,1-5) and actions (9,6-7), however impressive in themselves, are mere ὑποδείγματα (9,23) or ἀντίτυπα (9,24), a mere σκία (10,1) of Christ's perfect ministry and sacrifice. Similarly in chapter 10: πᾶς μὲν ἱερέως/οὐτος (sc. Χριστὸς) δέ... (vv. 11-12). In the end, Christ stands alone, over against all Old Testament realities.

Melchizedek alone will not fit into this pattern. As nowhere else in the epistle, there are not two terms in the comparison but three: Melchizedek, Abraham (including Levi and his descendants, 7,5.6.9, and by implication Aaron, v. 11), and Christ. Melchizedek's higher status is contrasted with that of Abraham; Christ's higher status is contrasted with that of Abraham's descendants; but the comparison between Melchizedek and Christ is defined no further than by saying that Melchizedek is ἀφομοιωμένος... τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ, v. 3 b, and indirectly by separate statements that both are (eternally) alive (ζῆν, v. 8, of Melchizedek; κατὰ δύναμιν ζωῆς ἀκατάλυτου, v. 16, of Christ). The situation could be summed up in the following diagram:



The difficulty is not merely that there is no other such threeterm comparison in Hebrews: such an argument from silence, in the case of a single

epistle, would be very weak. The point is that the argument is intrinsically awkward, and the wider context suggests that the author was aware of the fact. Of the three terms of comparison, Christ is logically superfluous in vv. 1-10, where he is mentioned only in passing in v. 3 b; while Melchizedek is logically superfluous in vv. 11-19, where he is mentioned only in the phrases κατὰ τὴν τάξιν/ὁμοιότητα Μελχισέδεκ⁽⁵⁾, and clearly from v. 20 onwards, where he is not mentioned at all.

A. T. Hanson's solution of the problem is simple but speculative:

Melchisedech is identical with Christ... The author believed that Melchisedech was the pre-existent Christ, [but] did not say so... because he did not quite have the courage to do so. It was too strong meat for his hearers. He hints in 5,11 that he would like to say a lot about Melchisedech, and that it would take a good deal of explanation. He would perhaps prefer his readers to draw for themselves the conclusion that he was aiming at⁽⁶⁾.

This reconstruction of the situation can certainly not be disproved. The author evidently believed in the pre-existence of Christ (e.g. 1,2), and there is nothing inherently impossible in supposing that the author believed Christ to have done something between creation and the incarnation. A. T. Hanson claims, with varying degrees of persuasiveness, that 3,1-6; 4,1-9; 11,24-28 and 12,22-27 may be understood in this way. It is also typical of the author to introduce motifs which are not developed immediately (Christ as ἰψχιερέως, 2,17; κατὰ τὴν τάξιν Μελχισέδεκ, 5,6.10), and occasionally not developed at all (Christ as ἀπόστολος, 3,1). What is difficult to conceive is that he should leave his readers to chew the "strong meat" for themselves — if indeed the identification of Melchizedek and Christ was "the conclusion that he was aiming at". The "strong meat" is surely the author's distinctive teaching about the significance of Christ's high priesthood and sacrifice; and this he will develop throughout chapters 8-9, the central theological section of the epistle⁽⁷⁾.

The problem of Melchizedek's status, and in particular the meaning of ἀφομοιωμένος... τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ, thus remains. It is a secondary matter whether the participle is to be translated with verbal force ("made like", sc. by God, cf. ἔθηκεν, 1,2, and a similar thought in 5,6) or adjectivally ("like"), as in the one Septuagintal occurrence, EpJer 63. The author's failure to develop the statement suggests the latter, but the main issue is unaffected. Nor is it as significant as has sometimes been supposed⁽⁸⁾ that here, Melchizedek is compared to Christ, and not vice versa, since elsewhere, where the

⁽⁵⁾ Κατὰ τὴν ὁμοιότητα Μελχισέδεκ in 7,15 is probably a stylistic variant for κατὰ τὴν τάξιν Μελχισέδεκ, a phrase which the author has used, other than in explicit quotation of Ps 110,4, in 5,10 and 6,20. The evidence for F. J. Horton's statement that ὁμοιότης in itself, independently of the context, "includes the idea of recapitulation" (*Melchizedek Tradition* 161), is slight.

⁽⁶⁾ A. T. HANSON, *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (London 1965) 70-71.
⁽⁷⁾ A. VANHOYE, *La structure littéraire de l'épître aux Hébreux* (Bruges - Paris 1974) 138-160, 386-9; cf. L. DUSSAUT, *Synopse structurale de l'épître aux Hébreux* (Paris 1981) 66-83.

⁽⁸⁾ E.g. by KOBELSKI, *Melchizedek*, 125.

immediate theme is not Melchizedek but Christ, the comparison goes in the opposite direction, Christ being called a "high priest like Melchizedek" (9). Attempts to assimilate Melchizedek in Hebrews to the angelic figure of H1QMelch(10) create more problems than they solve; if the author of Hebrews had thought of Melchizedek in this way, it would have been necessary for him either to contrast Melchizedek with Christ, or destroy the whole argument of chapter 1. Attempts, at the other extreme, to reduce Melchizedek to the lesser term of a typological contrast or a *qal walmaḥera* *fortiori* argument have no basis in the language or thought of the passage, which simply cannot be forced into the normal pattern of the author's use of the Old Testament (11). It would require extensive rewriting to make these verses say: "Christ is as much greater than Melchizedek as Melchizedek is greater than Abraham". Whatever ἀπομοιούμενος means, it cannot mean that (12).

Exegesis of Heb 7.1-10, even in the wider context of the epistle, thus offers no satisfactory solution to the problem of the status of Melchizedek. On internal evidence alone, the most one can say is that the author was led back from Ps 110.4 to Gen 14.17-20, the only other Old Testament reference to Melchizedek, but then did not really know what to do with him, and dropped him as soon as his peripheral usefulness for the argument was exhausted. Kobelski modestly concludes (13) that the author has "a very limited purpose" in introducing Melchizedek: "to show (1) that the priesthood of Jesus was superior to the levitical priesthood, and (2) that the priesthood of Jesus was eternal". Horton convincingly explains some of Hebrews' statements about Melchizedek on the basis that, as the first priest mentioned in the Torah, he was believed to be the first priest who ever lived (14). Such statements are correct as far as they go; but one is left asking why so careful a writer as the author of Hebrews should create unnecessary problems by using Melchizedek in chapter 7 to demonstrate a thesis which he supports by far more powerful arguments in chapters 8-9, without reference to Melchizedek.

(9) KOBELSKI, *Melchizedek*, 118, sees the use of ἀπομοιούμενος in 7.15 as evidence that "no technical meaning was attached to *taxin*"; similarly P. ELLINGSWORTH, "Just like Melchizedek", *BT* 28 (1977) 236-239.

(10) So M. DE JONGE and A. S. VAN DER WOUDE, "11Q Melchizedek and the New Testament", *NTS* 12 (1966) 301-326; J. FITZMYER, "Further Light on Melchizedek from Qumran Cave 11", *JBL* 86 (1967) 25-41, and HORTON, *Melchizedek* 155, disagree.

(11) F. SCHRÖGER, *Der Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes als Schriftausleger* (Regensburg 1968) 143-153, 258 on 7.4-20: "Das hermeneutische Instrumentarium des Hebräerbriefverfassers"; *JGJ* 60 (1970) 430-459 = J. ERNST (ed.), *Schriftauslegung* (Munich - Paderborn - Vienna 1972) 313-329, especially 322-323 on 7.2.4.

(12) Horton's statement: "The phrase ἀπομοιούμενος δὲ τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ does not create subordination; it assumes subordination" is not based on the language of v. 3b itself. Δὲ is indeed adversative, but the contrast is between the negative statements about Melchizedek in v. 3a and the positive statements in v. 3b, not between statements about Melchizedek and someone else.

(13) KOBELSKI, *Melchizedek*, 129.

(14) HORTON, *Melchizedek Tradition*, 157.

Light on this unresolved problem may be sought by examining some (15) of the recent studies of the *literary form and provenance* of Heb 7.1-3; other verses, especially v. 26, are sometimes drawn into the discussion.

At first sight, the search does not seem promising. There is clear evidence of traditions, older than or contemporary with Hebrews, which showed interest in the figure of Melchizedek, and which at times went far beyond the biblical evidence (16). There is less evidence, and correspondingly less agreement, about whether such traditions crystallised in particular texts, possibly a hymn, which could underlie part of Heb 7.1-3. The literary-critical evidence for the use of an extra-biblical *Vorlage* is difficult to assess, and the literary genre of such a *Vorlage* is more problematical still. The style of these verses has rhetorical but not necessarily poetic features, even bearing in mind the flexible form of primitive Christian hymns and other hymns of the period (17).

It is therefore not surprising that reconstructions of the hymn differ. Deichgräber (18) and Schröger (19), for example, deny the presence of any hymnic material. It is true that such passages as 1.1-4; 4.12-13; 12.1-2.18-24; 13.20-21 amply illustrate the presence in the epistle of eloquent and rhythmic material, virtually indistinguishable from the material claimed as hymnic in other parts of the New Testament. To assign all these passages to *Vorlagen* would be to risk arguing in a circle. Zimmermann notes differences between 7.1-4 and other New Testament hymns:

Er beginnt nicht mit ὄς, sondern mit οὐτός, er beschreibt nicht den Erlöserweg Christi (vgl. Phil 2,6-11; Kol 1,15-20; 1 Tim 3,16; Joh 1,2-17; Hebr 1,3; 5,7-10), sondern besteht im wesentlichen aus Prädikationen, die nur in der letzten Zeile in eine verbale Aussage ausmünden (20).

Michel identifies v. 3 as a four-lined stanza (21). Schille (22), followed by Jewett (23), finds three three-lined strophes in vv. 1a (το πρῶτον), 2b (from υἱῶν) and 3 (omitting ἀπομοιούμενος δὲ τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ). Nomoto (24) considers vv. 1-2a to be the author's summary of the Genesis passage, and

(15) For a fuller survey, see ZIMMERMANN, *Bekennnis*, 80-99.

(16) HORTON, *Melchizedek Tradition* 54-86, discusses Philo, *Legum Allegorice* III §§ 79-82; *De Congressu* § 99; *De Abrahamo* § 235; 1QApGen and 11QMelch; JOSEPHUS, *Flav* vi § 438 and *Antiquities* i § 179-181. He later, 114-130, examines rabbinic sources, some of which may contain material as old as Hebrews. (17) E. NORDEN, *Agnostos Theos*, Untersuchungen zur Formgeschichte religiöser Rede (Darmstadt 1974) 177-201.

(18) R. DEICHGRÄBER, *Gottes hymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit* (Göttingen 1967) 176-178.

(19) SCHRÖGER, *Verfasser*, 142.

(20) ZIMMERMANN, *Bekennnis*, 94.

(21) O. MICHEL, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (MeyerK; Göttingen 1975) ad loc. (22) G. SCHILLE, "Erwägungen zur Hohepriesterlehre des Hebräerbriefes", *ZNW* 46 (1955) 85-87.

(23) R. JEWETT, *Letter to Pilgrims* (New York 1981) 118.

(24) S. NOMOTO, *Die Hohepriester-Typologie im Hebräerbrief* (Hamburg 1966) 126.

vv. 2b-3 as based on an extra-biblical *Vorlage*. Theissen⁽²⁵⁾ arbitrarily transfers κατά δύναμιν ζωῆς ἀκταλῶτου from v. 16 to replace ἀφομοιωμένος δὲ τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ; he also eliminates from the hymn the etymologies in v. 2, as being academic rather than poetic, and adds to the hymn parts of vv. 25-26. Zimmermann identifies the etymologies as traditional though not necessarily hymnic, and inserts v. 26b (from ὄσιος) before the final line of the hymn, μένει ἱερὺς εἰς τὸ διηνεκές (v. 3). No reason for the transposition is given, and in any such process, there is a danger of selecting any elements which will combine to make a coherent poem. Zimmermann finally advances the complex thesis that the hymn was originally about the exaltation of Christ, but that the author of Hebrews first dissolves this setting, and then partially restores it by the addition of ἀφομοιωμένος δὲ τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ⁽²⁶⁾.

Despite this scholarly disarray, the possibility of a traditional, even hymnic element in vv. 1-3 is not to be entirely discounted, though the evidence falls far short of proof. Such a hypothesis would help to account for a number of otherwise problematical factors: (a) the greater smoothness of style and construction which is obtained if the biblical material of vv. 1b-2a (ὁ συναντήσας . . . ἐμέρισεν Ἀβραάμ), and the traditional etymologies of v. 2b, are omitted; (b) the unemphatic and unexplained reference in v. 3b to the Son of God, which could be the author's insertion into a hymnic *Vorlage*; and especially (c) the ambivalent status of Melchizedek discussed above.

The hymn itself could thus tentatively be reconstructed as follows:

Οὗτος ὁ Μελαχισέδεκ
 βασιλεύς Σαλήμ,
 ἱερὺς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου
 ἀπατορ, ἀμήτορ, ἀγενεαλόγητος
 μήτε ἀρχὴν ἡμερῶν
 μήτε ζωῆς τέλος ἔχω
 μένει ἱερὺς εἰς τὸ διηνεκές.

There is nothing in this to require a Christian origin. The author's original interest in the hymn may have been aroused by its suggestion (especially when read in conjunction with Ps 110.4) of a priesthood distinct from, and earlier than, that of the levitical priests. The author's own re-reading of the Genesis passage could have led to the insertion of vv. 1b-2a. The midrashic development in vv. 4-10 is based on vv. 1-3 in their present form, but shows generally greater interest in the Genesis narrative than in the underlying hymn.

By combining the exegetical and literary-critical evidence, it is thus possible to reach a general view of the circumstances in which Heb 7.1-3 was composed.

⁽²⁵⁾ G. THEISSEN, *Untersuchungen zum Hebräerbrief* (SNT 2; Gütersloh 1969) 20-25.

⁽²⁶⁾ ZIMMERMANN, *Bekennitis*, 99.

Two main influences led the author towards the figure of Melchizedek. The first was his own exploration of Scripture. Beginning with the widespread christological understanding of Ps 110.1, he discovered fresh meaning in the priesthood κατά τὴν τάξιν Μελαχισέδεκ of Ps 110.4, and was thus led back to Gen 14.17-20. The second influence came from outside. It was the pressure of non-biblical, probably non-Christian, interest in Melchizedek, one product of which may have been a hymn. The evidence suggests either (1) that these non-biblical traditions reached the author in a more restrained form than in 11QMelch, or (2) that the author himself removed speculative elements from the tradition as he received it. A final choice is impossible, but the first alternative is to be preferred as the simpler.

Both these influences can be seen in the resultant mosaic of Heb 7.1-3. As the following verses confirm, the author did not merely juxtapose them; as a creative writer and theologian, he modified them both. Most of the modifications of the Genesis passage are probably no more than skilful condensation; the omission of the words "he brought out bread and wine" from Gen 14.18 may be more significant, as showing a desire to avoid any suggestion of Melchizedek's serving Abraham, or offering him a reciprocal gift.

We may suppose that the author similarly modified his secondary, extra-biblical *Vorlage*. Evidence of modification by transposition, and still more by omission, is too slight for us to speak with any confidence. Modifications by insertion are a different matter. The etymologies do not belong in a hymn, and there is firm evidence⁽²⁷⁾ that they did not originate with Hebrews. The author does not develop them, nor does he show any interest in similar etymologies elsewhere.

The words ἀφομοιωμένος δὲ τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ may be understood in either of two ways.

The easier but ultimately weaker hypothesis is to assume that the author is continuing to quote the *Vorlage*, in which case he would be using borrowed language for which he was not personally responsible⁽²⁸⁾. On the one hand, it would be in keeping with his style to continue a quotation until it reached a climax of importance to his argument, as in 8.8-12 = Jer 31.31-34. On the other hand, one might expect him to omit a line which caused problems, as in the shorter reading of 2.7 = Ps 8.6. The evidence is inconclusive.

The more difficult but probably stronger hypothesis is that the author is indeed responsible for the words ἀφομοιωμένος δὲ τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ; that he added them in order to provide a minimum of Christian comment on a non-Christian hymn; but that he refrained from expanding them in order to preserve the flow of the hymn, and maintain the force of its climax, μένει ἱερὺς εἰς τὸ διηνεκές. On either hypothesis, the author's argument is momentarily distorted by extraneous forces, as Neptune distorts the orbit of Uranus.

⁽²⁷⁾ Cf. PHILO, *Legum Allegoriae* III § 79; JOSEPHUS, *War* vi § 438; *Antiquities* i § 180.

⁽²⁸⁾ It is slight evidence in support of this view that ἀφομοιωμένοι is not used elsewhere in the epistle, or indeed in the New Testament.

The distortion is fully overcome in the midrash of vv. 4-10; and by v. 11, the author is ready to gather up once more, with a firm *εἰ μὲν οὖν*, the threads of his main, christological, argument.

What, then, is the answer to Tholuck's question? Is Melchizedek in Hebrews "alongside Christ" or "subordinate to him"? The question is one which the author of Hebrews never raises, so any answer to it must contain elements of speculation. The speculation is at its maximum if we are required to think of Melchizedek as a being distinct from but co-equal with Christ. The overwhelming weight of the epistle's theology, not to mention the rest of New Testament tradition, is against such a supposition, and the language of Heb 7.3 does not require it. The theory of an implicit identification between Melchizedek and Christ is less alien to the epistle, but the evidence, as we have suggested, falls short of conviction, and the theory itself appears to arise from a desire to impose on the material a neater theological pattern than it in fact possesses. If Tholuck had been able to put his question directly to the author of Hebrews, the author would no doubt have chosen the second alternative: Melchizedek is subordinate to Christ. Yet this is not what the author is saying on his own initiative, even by implication. The author appears to be addressing readers acquainted with biblically-based, non-Christian speculation about Melchizedek, and what he is saying to them may be paraphrased as follows: "You find Melchizedek a great and fascinating figure, and you are right. He reminds us Christians of the Son of God himself. He is in any case greater than Abraham and everything which Abraham inaugurated. Thus Scripture itself points to something higher, and incidentally even older, than the old dispensation which is now superseded in Christ".

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