

BRIERCREST COLLEGE

## Melchizedek: A Foreshadow of the Messiah

Pentateuch (BT100B)  
Jim Paulson

**Chris Culy**

October 2005

---

Throughout the Bible, we encounter many mysterious characters that we know little or nothing about. Melchizedek, who appears in only two brief passages in the entire Old Testament, is one of the most well-known of these characters of mystery. Because so little is recorded concerning the ancient priest-king, many theories have arisen as to his historicity; some suggest that Melchizedek was actually Shem, the son of Noah, who, by the genealogy recorded in Genesis 11:10-26, outlived Abraham by approximately 30 years, while others propose that Melchizedek was God in the flesh, possibly even an earlier appearance of Jesus himself. However, as Horton notes, “the assumption that Melchizedek was, in fact, a pre-Israelite, Canaanite king of Jerusalem has become widely accepted.”<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the issue of Melchizedek’s true identity, the question still remains as to what the theological significance of his character truly is. This question is answered extensively in the epistle to the Hebrews. Although the historicity of Melchizedek, king of Salem, is debated, he is clearly portrayed as a glimpse of the future Messiah through the unknown nature of his lineage, his eternal priesthood and unending life, and the superiority of his priesthood to that of the Levites.

Hebrews 7:3 says of Melchizedek, “Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever.”<sup>2</sup> The beginning of this verse focuses on Melchizedek’s lineage and its unknown nature. “Following a common exegetical practice known as ‘argument from silence,’ ”<sup>3</sup> the author of Hebrews arrives at the conclusion that Melchizedek

---

<sup>1</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* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 35.

<sup>2</sup>All Scripture citations come from the New International Version.

<sup>3</sup>George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 253-254.

did not have parents or children. This technique of “argument from silence,” though it was a common technique in the past, may seem foreign and strange to modern readers. However, the silence regarding Melchizedek’s lineage is

full of mystery, especially in the setting of the Old Testament, and it is not surprising that our author should regard the omission of any mention of parentage or posterity as remarkable. For one thing, in the early chapters of Genesis, in which genealogy is so prominent a feature . . . Melchizedek is the only personage among the worshipers of the one true God whose ancestry and descendants receive no mention.<sup>4</sup>

This is an important point, for now that the author of Hebrews has established that Melchizedek’s unknown lineage is valid and true, he does two crucial things: first, he compares Melchizedek to Jesus Christ, whose divine nature is similar in that it has no genealogy either; and second, he demonstrates that “Clearly, there are two ways to obtain the priestly dignity: by oath and by descent.”<sup>5</sup>

As we read the comparison of Melchizedek and Jesus that the author of Hebrews puts forth, we must realize the “direction of the comparison. Hebrews does not say that the Son of God is like Melchizedek, but that Melchizedek is like the Son of God.”<sup>6</sup> This is a very important concept to realize as we seek to ascertain the theological significance of the character of Melchizedek. The fact that Melchizedek is like the Son of God and not vice versa tells us that Melchizedek is less than the Son of God, that he was not a model to be followed, but a shadow to be fulfilled. Furthermore, the comparison of Melchizedek’s lineage to that of Jesus is not a comparison to Jesus’ human lineage because that lineage was known; rather, it is a comparison to the divine nature of Jesus, which cannot be comprehended and therefore is unknown. However, the significance of this unknown lineage is expanded upon further as the author moves forward, detailing the nature of the Melchizedekan priesthood.

The fact that Melchizedek did not have a lineage and yet was a priest of God Most High was a foreign concept to first-century Jews. For them, someone who was a priest was a priest because he was a descendant of Levi and Aaron. The author of Hebrews, however, shows through Melchizedek that there was a different kind of priesthood, one based on appointment through oath by God. This was the type of priesthood that Jesus was a part of. As Koester states, “Appointment, rather than descent, is the determining factor.”<sup>7</sup> The author of Hebrews proves that priesthood through appointment by oath is legitimate, therefore legitimizing both the Melchizedekan priesthood and the priesthood of Jesus, who, humanly speaking, was descended not from Levi, but from Judah.

<sup>4</sup>Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 248.

<sup>5</sup>M. J. Paul, “The Order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4 and Heb 7:3),” *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (Spr 1987): 208.

<sup>6</sup>Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews*, The Anchor Bible (Toronto: Doubleday, 2001), 349.

<sup>7</sup>Koester, *Hebrews*, 351.

The latter part of Hebrews 7:3 deals with the eternal nature of the life and priesthood of Melchizedek. These two things further identify the character of Melchizedek with Jesus. Melchizedek is once again compared with the divine nature of Christ in that he is “without beginning of days or end of life.” Then the verse goes on, further likening Melchizedek to the Messiah, saying that “like the Son of God he remains a priest forever.” This is a very important idea, for although the Aaronic priesthood was considered “perpetual,” the perpetual nature existed in the fact that it continued from one generation to the next, not in that one person remained priest forever and ever.<sup>8</sup> Guthrie notes,

The Levites were priests by virtue of heritage and ceased from office upon death. Scripture places no such limitations on Melchizedek’s priesthood. For the author of Hebrews, therefore, the Genesis narrative confirms what is clearly stated in Psalm 110:4—a priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek lasts forever.<sup>9</sup>

Through this revelation of the nature of the priesthood of Melchizedek, who is merely a shadow of the future Christ, we begin to comprehend the priesthood of the Messiah, for “We gain an understanding of Christ’s priesthood, the eternal heavenly priesthood, by understanding the features of the earthly perpetual priesthood of Melchizedek.”<sup>10</sup> This realization of understanding leads the author of Hebrews forward as he draws a most significant conclusion: because of the nature of the Melchizedekan priesthood, it is superior to the priesthood of Aaron.

The priesthood of Melchizedek existed before the Levitical priesthood and will continue after, for it is not based on genealogy, but, as Hebrews 7:16 says, on “the basis of the power of an indestructible life.” Melchizedek’s priesthood represented, as Westcott observed, “ ‘a non-Jewish, a universal priesthood.’ ”<sup>11</sup> And most importantly, the Melchizedekan priesthood represented a priesthood that could justify men forever, in stark contrast to the Levitical priesthood that was unable to offer true and final justification. As the author of Hebrews argues, the priesthood of Levi was a temporal, Jewish priesthood that was unable to justify men before God for all time; but through the grace of God, another priesthood is now provided, the Messianic priesthood of Jesus Christ, which was foreshadowed by the priesthood of Melchizedek, a priesthood that was and is eternal, universal, and most importantly, able to justify men before their Creator God, once for all eternity. Furthermore, as Herveus puts forth, “ ‘If Melchizedek, who was a sign and shadow, is preferred to Abraham and to all the levitical priests, how much more Christ, who is the truth and the substance! . . . If a type of Christ is greater than he who has the promises [Abraham], how much more so is Christ himself!’ ”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Paul, “The Order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4 and Heb 7:3),” 204-207.

<sup>9</sup>Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 254.

<sup>10</sup>Horton, *The Melchizedek Tradition*, 162.

<sup>11</sup>cited in Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 181.

<sup>12</sup>cited in Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 251.

As readers and scholars of the Old Testament encounter the character of Melchizedek and debate ensues as to his historicity, we must realize that it is not the true identity of Melchizedek that matters, but his theological significance—that he was, in multiple ways, another Old Testament glimpse of God’s future plan to send Jesus Christ to earth as the Messiah to redeem mankind from all its sin. Through his unknown lineage, his eternal life and priesthood and the superiority of his priesthood to that of Aaron, Melchizedek prefigures the Messiah’s character and priesthood, the priesthood of the new covenant which supersedes the old covenant with its temporal priesthood. Primarily, and most importantly, we must realize that the theological significance of the priest-king of ancient Jerusalem is this: “Melchizedek is the figure, but Christ is the reality.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 248.

## Bibliography

1. Astour, Michael C. "Melchizedek." In *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 684-686. Toronto: Doubleday, 1992.
2. Callender, Dexter E., Jr. "Melchizedek." In *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 881-882. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.
3. Guthrie, George H. *Hebrews*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998.
4. Hamilton, Victor P. *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990.
5. Horton, Fred L., Jr. *The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century A.D. and in the Epistle to the Hebrews*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976.
6. Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe. *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977.
7. Koester, Craig R. *Hebrews*. The Anchor Bible. Toronto: Doubleday, 2001.
8. Paul, M. J. "The Order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4 and Heb 7:3)." *Westminster Theological Journal* 49 (Spr 1987): 195-211.
9. Sedgewick, Colin J. "Melchizedek the Mystery Man." *Expository Times* 104 (Ap 1993): 213-214.
10. Wenham, Gordon J. *Genesis 1-15*. Word Biblical Commentary. Waco, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1987.