

# NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

## *Lesson 36*

### Hebrews: Melchizedek

I struggle to put this lesson into context. There is not a place in my life where I find an intermediary as critical to matters. The closest I can come, and it falls way short, might be travelling with my best friend, my wife Becky.

When we go into countries where Spanish is the spoken language, I never venture far from Becky's side. She is my communication key. Becky is fluent in Spanish. When I'm with her, all Spanish becomes English. Any English thought I have readily goes into Spanish with her at my side.

Many places we've gone, it may not make a huge difference, for lots of folks speak *some* English. But we've made trips where we have rented a car and driven through the Spanish back country. We found little villages in Extremadura Spain where I'm convinced they didn't have an English speaker in town.

No problem for me, though. I had Becky! She could get us in our hotel, help us find directions, get choices about restaurants and more.

As I stated earlier, this is not a perfect example, but it illustrates the importance of needing someone who can stand in the middle between you and someone else. It falls way short of the Biblical and ancient concept of a priest, but it gets this evangelical, southern fellow a bit closer to a concept that is foreign to most of my thinking.

A priest as an intermediary doesn't fit into my mindset without considerable mental effort. With that mental effort, however, I began to better understand the ancient Judaic idea of "priest," and with that, better understand the passage of Hebrews we consider today.

### PRIESTS

In ancient societies, including Judaism, there was always a drive to win the favor of the gods or God. With limited understanding of how the world was composed of what we term "Laws of Nature," the variations in weather, predictability of crops, success in love, good health and poor health, all seemed dependent upon some higher power. Many in history have used God or gods to fill in the gaps of what was known. This way drove many people to get on God's good side. After all, who doesn't want good health and success in life?

Most everyone, however, is handicapped when it comes to getting on God's good side. There is so much involved. First off, why would one as powerful as God even

care about what we are about. Surely we have nothing to offer such a one that controls everything from weather to health. Furthermore, if such a powerful God exists, what makes us think he would be any more approachable than the kings, rulers, and powerful people of the world? Undoubtedly a super God would be even more unapproachable.

Of course, there is the added problem of most people wanting something in return for a favor. God, we might think, would be no different. Then the question arises whether there is something one could even offer to a God that the God doesn't already have or could access.

Into these ancient mindsets came the faith of Abraham and the nation of his lineage. The story of Abraham stands out in ancient literature because God calls Abram to a unique relationship. God is going to provide direction and use Abraham in God's purposes. In the process, God is going to shower Abraham with great blessings. God will build a nation from Abraham and use that nation to change the entire world.

God expressed a particular interest in Abraham. God gave particular direction to Abraham. God was not above visiting Abraham on occasion. We see God seeking Abraham, and we also see times where Abraham sought to express his thoughts and feelings to God. One of those was a time of gratitude for God blessing Abraham's rescue mission of Lot, as we will consider in more depth in the story of Melchizedek below.

History flowed from (and through) Abraham and the Israelite nation arose. Once the nation was freed from bondage in Egypt, they set out for the land promised to Abraham. Along the way, God took the initiative to enter into a covenant with Israel on the base of Mount Sinai. This was, like the story of Abraham, a time where God began the initiative of the relationship. God gave the people the choice of following him, and once the agreement was reached, was God to the nation, and the nation were set aside as God's chosen people.

The Sinai covenant included a set of instructions for life, culture, and more. A part of that list was the clear instructions that God was too holy for common treatment. God was not someone easily invoked. He was no magic word nor was he subject to the power or control of anyone. The people had a need for God, but God had no real need for the people.

With a purpose we more readily discern from our historical viewpoint, God was teaching the nation, and others who learned from the God-Israel relationship, that there was a beauty, perfection, and power about God that mortal humanity could never really see or grasp. Moses was unable to see God face to face. The glory of God wasn't containable or fathomable. His name was not even to be said lightly or for no reason. Yet God desired to be known and in relationship.

God set up a process where his holiness was confirmed, but also where a relationship was based. This was the priestly system. Descendants of Aaron, from the tribe of Levi, were designated to serve as priests. As such, they oversaw and administered the sacrifices that would show repentance for sins and flaws in the human world.

Additionally, there was a high priest designated who would be the key intermediary, offering the atoning sacrifice for the people, and coming, on behalf of the people, into the symbolic presence of God. In the days of Moses this was in the tabernacle, but after construction of the temple, the work was done there.

The priests were key. They were the nexus between people and God. While God would still single out the occasional man or woman for something more direct, the main contact point year in and year out was the priest.

As we approach Hebrews, we need to consider how the early Jewish Christian believer might have thought is worth returning to the practice of Judaism and the comfort of an earthly priest to do the intermediary work with God. It is a bit like my comfort with Becky speaking for me in the hinterlands of Spain.

With this in mind, let us consider the teachings about Melchizedek.

### MELCHIZEDEK

Melchizedek is mentioned in only three places in the Bible, in Genesis, Psalms, and Hebrews.

In Genesis 12 the LORD called Abraham (then called Abram) to leave his home and go where God would make a great nation of him. Abram left Ur, taking his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, their people and possessions heading to the land of Canaan. During a famine, Abram and his group went to Egypt. Upon their return to Canaan, there were disputes among the herdsmen of Lot and Abram, so Lot went one way and Abram the other.

By Genesis 14, there is a battle between the kings in Lot's area and another group of kings. Lot's kings lose, and Lot is captured, along with his family and possessions. One person escaped and found Abram, telling him about what had happened. Abram gathered the 318 trained men in his household (meaning all those who worked for and with him, not simply his relatives) and went on a rescue mission.

Abram was successful and brought back Lot and the others, along with their possessions. Here we have the first encounter for our discussion:

After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him [Abram] at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). And Melchizedek

king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him a tenth of everything (Gen. 14:17-20).

We can parse the story into some interesting sections. First, we note that Melchizedek is both king and priest. He is the first priest mentioned in the Bible, and his combination of those two offices is set apart from the Egyptian influences that might be in the culture. In Egypt, and in other ancient cultures of the Levant, often the king was seen as divine, being a god, rather than simply a priest to a god. Melchizedek, is clearly the latter, however, king and priest. Melchizedek pronounces God's blessings, not his own.

With the divine number of three (ancient numbers had symbolic meanings as well as numerical values, and three was the divine number), we have three uses of the Hebrew "bless" in the passage. Melchizedek *blessed* [1] Abraham saying "*Blessed* [2] be Abram by God Most High," and "*blessed* [3] be God Most High." The blessings of the priest were both human directed (to Abram) and heavenly directed (to God).

Abram responds in submission, giving a tithe to Mechizedek.

Writing about this in 1877, Dr. J. Oswald Dykes noted,

It is thus there steps upon the scene one of the most mysterious personages of Holy Writ...not only a worshipper of the true God, but a man of such priestly sanctity, that beneath his hand the patriarch himself bows to receive the blessing of God, and through him the patriarch prefers his grateful offerings to Jehovah.<sup>1</sup>

Since before the completion of the New Testament, the church has seen in Melchizedek a representation of Christ. As we further break apart this story, we see much of why the church saw this speaking of Christ packed into the few verses:

1. "Melchizedek" as a name carries significance. The name can be seen as a composite of two Hebrew words, "*Melek*" meaning "king" and "*sedeq*" meaning "righteous." In the form used in the name, it can mean, "My king is righteous." It conveys the idea of the king as "righteous" in an ethical or moral sense, but also "righteous" as "legitimate." This echoes heavily of the New Testament attributes and name of Christ, the King of kings, who was called "the Righteous One" (Acts 3:14, 7:52). Not only is Christ our king

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<sup>1</sup> Dykes, J. Oswald, *Abraham, the Friend of God: A study from Old Testament History* (London: Nisbet & Co. 1877) at 107.

righteous, but as Paul emphasized, when we are in Christ we actually become the “righteousness of God” (see, e.g., 2 Cor. 5:21). Christ is both legitimately God’s and the one who legitimizes us.

2. Melchizedek not only had a righteous king, but he was himself the “King of Salem.” The Hebrew uses *melek* again, this time tying it to the word “Salem.” The word Salem is better known in its modernized form of “shalom.” It means “peace.” Thus we have the King of Righteousness also being the King of Peace. Of course the church long understood Isaiah 9:6 to be prophetic about Christ as a child as it phrased his name to include the title, “Prince of Peace.”

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, ***Prince of Peace.***

3. Further importance is drawn from the fact that many scholars believe that “Salem” was an older name for the city of Jeru-salem.<sup>2</sup> This is tied to Jesus who himself called Jerusalem, “the city of the great King” (Mt. 5:35). It was in Jerusalem that Jesus spoke of the Temple as his “Father’s house” (Lk 2:49). Over Jerusalem we read of Jesus weeping and lamenting with a play on the meaning of the city as the “foundation of peace”

And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for ***peace!*** But now they are hidden from your eyes (Lk 19:41).

Finally, I should add that John in his revelation saw the “new Jerusalem” coming down from heaven prepared as a bride for her husband—Jesus (Rev. 21:2,9-10).

4. Melchizedek brings out bread and wine for Abram. These same elements form the communal supper for Christ and his apostles (Mt. 26:26-29).
5. Melchizedek was a “priest,” a label that demands note because Christ was also a Priest. In John 17, Christ is praying for his followers in anticipation

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<sup>2</sup> A number of scholars see “Jerusalem” as a composite of *Jeru* and *Salem* meaning the “foundation of peace.” Scripture seems to equate biblical Jerusalem with the city of Salem in passages like Psalm 76:1-2 “In Judah God is known; his name is great in Israel. His abode has been established in Salem, his dwelling place in Zion.” See, Davidson, Benjamin, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, (Hendrikson 2007) at 346; Berlin and Brettler, ed’s, *The Jewish Study Bible*, (Oxford) 2004) at 34-35.

of the crucifixion. Scholars call this prayer “the High Priestly Prayer” recognizing Christ intervenes as a High Priest. The title added to Jesus’ name is “Christ” (Hebrew “*Messiah*”) meaning “anointed.” In the Old Testament, three groups of people were anointed for service to God, prophets, priests, and kings. Jesus as Messiah/Christ was all three. He was prophet, priest and king of God Most High. Over and over the writer of Hebrews makes this point (Heb. 2:17, 3:1, 4:14-15, 5:5, etc.). In fact, as we will make the point later, Hebrews 5:6 makes it clear,

So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, □"You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek" (quoting Psalm 110:4).

6. Melchizedek was a priest of “God Most High.” “Most High God” was a term used in both the Old and New Testaments to refer to Jehovah God. In Luke 8:26-33 when Jesus was casting out the Legion of demons from a man of the Gerasenes, the demons recognized Jesus as “Son of the Most High God.” Similarly, when Mary was hearing from the angel prior to the incarnation she was told,

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the **Most High** will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Lk 1:35).

Paul and his missionary team were similarly called by one who had a spirit of divination, “servants of the Most High God” (Acts 16:17).

Melchizedek as priest of God Most High was clearly a foreshadowing of Christ.

7. Melchizedek blessed Abram by “God Most High.” This is carried forward to the relationship between Christ and the church because it is in Christ, Paul taught, that the church has been blessed with “every spiritual blessing” (Eph. 1:3, 6).
8. Abram tithes to Melchizedek. Abram gives Melchizedek a tenth of all he recovered. This is seen to reflect the charge of God’s people to tithe to God, recognizing that all things come from his hand. As Leviticus set out the law and principle,

Every **tithe** of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD’s; it is holy to the LORD (Lev. 27:30).

This altogether brief encounter is more magnified when we consider that Melchizedek is mentioned in only three places in Scripture: (1) here in Genesis 14, (2) in Psalm 110, and (3) in Hebrews 5-7.

The writer of Hebrews understood these same ideas and used both the Genesis and Psalm passage to explain some of the implications of Melchizedek for the church:

So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"; as he says also in another place, "***You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.***"

The role of Jesus is then set out for his actions on behalf of the people as the intermediary.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ***being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek*** (Heb. 5:5-10).

Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become ***a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek*** (Heb. 6:20).

Melchizedek is unique among Old Testament priests of God. As Edward Fudge explained,

Both Jesus and Melchizedek occupy the dual role of king/priest, but our author focuses on their qualification to be appointed priest. Appointment to the Levitical priesthood required bloodline (Nehemiah 7:63-64), birth date (Numbers 4:46-47) and a flawless body (Leviticus 21:16-20). Melchizedek had no priestly father, mother or genealogy (Hebrews 7:3). His priesthood was not term limited by beginning or end but was rather perpetual (Hebrews 7:3). The only basis for Melchizedek's priesthood was his own character.

In the same way, Jesus' priesthood does not depend on family tree or legal term, but rather on his holy character and obedient life. His qualification for appointment as priest was not a perfect body ("a law of physical requirement") but a sinless life (Hebrews 7:16). Because Jesus was completely free of sin, death could not hold him. His priesthood is energized and sustained by the inherent dynamic of an indestructible life. For the same reason, God could swear that Jesus

would be priest forever and know that he would never change his mind.<sup>3</sup>

Then in Chapter seven, Hebrews goes into greater detail, even recounting the events between Abram and Melchizedek:

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.

See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. In the one case tithes are received by mortal men, but in the other case, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Fudge, Edward, *Leaven: A Journal for Christian Ministry*, 17/4 (4th Qtr. 2009), p. 193.

indestructible life. For it is witnessed of him, "You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek." (Heb. 7:1-15).

It follows immediately after this story where Melchizedek blesses Abram that God appeared to Abram promising his "reward shall be very great" (Gen. 15:1). God then promised Abram a son for an heir and offspring that are as innumerable as the stars in heaven. Abram believed the LORD and his faith was "counted to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

In the Hebrews passage on Melchizedek, we see the writer's continued emphasis on the superiority of Christ to the practice of simple animal sacrifices and the temple worship. Jesus does something beyond temporal daily, weekly, or even annual ordeals. Jesus is the real permanent intermediary, having paid a real price, and stepping into the gap between God who seeks a relationship and people who have no ability to get into that relationship on their own accord. In Jesus, we have a high priest who ties the knot between the two.

### POINTS FOR HOME

1. "*Blessed be Abram... and blessed be God.*" (Gen. 14:19).

I like this because it ties both ends together. These are the actions of God in Jesus. In Jesus, God has blessed those who come before him in worship and submission. By the same stroke, God is blessed in the process. Jesus is not only a blessing to us, but his actions serve to lift up and declare God as GREAT! Truly he is God Most High! He is the God who loves perfectly and yet keeps justice, true to his character. In Jesus the blessings are bi-directional!

2. "*Abram gave him a tenth of everything*" (Gen. 14:20)

I have no possession to give God that he doesn't already have. He made the cattle, shall I kill one on his behalf? Do I really have anything to earn his favor? No. Yet does that stop me from giving? I hope not! I do not want to be one who gives to get. I want to be one who gives out of a gracious nature. I want to learn to be a giver. That is the nature of God, and it is what I want to become.

3. "*Melchizedek met Abraham ...*" (Heb. 7:1).

I am constantly amazed that we worship a pursuing God. God seeks us. God wants in relationship to us. God wants to spend time with us. I need to really *really* think about that.