

5. Though the writer spoke directly to his readers about issues pertaining to them and their circumstance and challenges to their faith, his words reach beyond them to speak to every Christian reader in every generation. For the things his audience faced as first-century Jewish disciples of Jesus are things that, in general terms at least, every Christian faces. Regression in one's faith because of negligence is an ever-present danger for believers, and everyone who claims Jesus' name must take seriously their obligation to endure all things in patient faith and strive without compromise to grow up in Him. Complete Christiformity is the destiny appointed for every one of God's children, and this is the goal toward which the Spirit is working. To stray from this mindset and pursuit is to grieve the Spirit, and, in the case of those who fall away from the Messiah, to quench the Spirit altogether. This is true regardless of whether a Christian is Jewish or Gentile, or what century or culture he or she inhabits.

The writer's instruction in this parenthesis profits all Christian readers because the challenges of faith and faithfulness are universal. But it's also profitable in that it provides important insight into how he, a first-century Jewish disciple, perceived the "Christ event" in relation to Israel's history as God's covenant people. His perspective is crucially important, first because it was the *Spirit's* perspective, if indeed his epistle is inspired and canonical. But it's also important in that it contributes to the perspectives provided by Paul, Peter, John, James and the other apostolic witnesses to Jesus – witnesses, who, by Jesus' own acknowledgment, would testify of Him through the illumination and leading of His Spirit (John 14:25-26, 15:26-16:15; cf. Acts 2). And when the Hebrews writer's perspective is set alongside the other New Testament writings, it's clear that his understanding of Jesus' person and work and its outcome and fruit perfectly accords with the other witnesses. At the same time, his contribution is indispensable because of how thoroughly it addresses the promise-fulfillment correspondence between the Christ event and the Israelite history grounded in Abraham.

It's from this perspective of Jesus the Messiah as the fulfillment of Israel and its history as God's covenant people that the writer sets out His superiority to God's angelic servants, Moses, and Aaron. He is superior to them because He embodies in His person and work what they prefigured. He is the *substance* of which they – and everyone and everything pertaining to Israel's covenant life with God – were the *shadow* (cf. 8:1-6, 10:1-22 with Colossians 2:16-17). This same form of superiority underlies the writer's association of Jesus and His priesthood with Melchizedek. As with Moses and Aaron, he related Melchizedek to Jesus as promise to fulfillment, but the amount of space he devoted to discussing this relationship indicates that he regarded it as especially important (5:1-7:28). And the balance of the epistle demonstrates this, and shows why it's the case: *Jesus as the fulfillment of Melchizedek is fundamental to the superiority of His status, His priesthood, His mediation, and His covenant*. The writer could not make his argument regarding those things without addressing the relationship God ordained between Melchizedek and Jesus, His ultimate and supreme King-Priest.

Jesus' relationship to Melchizedek is foundational to numerous matters of promise and fulfillment, but in terms of chapter seven, the writer focused on Levi and the priesthood associated with him. He first argued that Jesus is superior to Levi *himself* (7:1-10), and then that his *priesthood* is superior to Levi's (7:11-28). The writer previously legitimized Jesus' priesthood by showing that it came about in the same way as Aaron's did. Though He is a priest of a different order, His priesthood doesn't deviate from or usurp God's will and design for a priestly order and ministration. Yahweh, the God of Israel, called and ordained the man Jesus, just as He did Aaron (5:1-7).

Jesus' priesthood and priestly ministration carry the same divine ordination and sanction as Aaron's, but He is a high priest of an entirely different order, which implies one two scenarios: Either the two priesthoods coincide with some sort of shared authority and ministration, or Jesus' priesthood has, in some sense, supplanted or replaced the former Aaronic order. In fact, the writer insists that the latter has replaced the former – not by abrogation or usurpation, but fulfillment. Jesus' priesthood is the substance of which Aaron's was the prefiguring shadow. *The Levitical priesthood and its ministration have passed away because they have fulfilled their preparatory and prophetic purpose in the salvation history that has now reached its apex and destiny in the person and work of Jesus the Messiah.*

This is the way the writer understood Jesus' superiority to Aaron and the Levitical priesthood, and he made his argument in chapter seven along two lines, both of which stand on the premise that Jesus is the fulfillment of Melchizedek: The first is a *scriptural* argument for Melchizedek's superiority over Levi (in whom the Levitical/Aaronic priesthood was established and localized), and the second is a *covenantal* and *historical* argument for the superiority of Jesus' Melchizedekian priesthood and its covenant ministration over the Levitical counterpart.

Again, the essential foundation of the writer's argument is that Melchizedek served a prototypical role in the salvation history. Even though the Old Testament has little to say about him as an historical figure, it does underscore his significant place in the messianic revelation disclosed and developed through Israel's history.

- The early Christians understood this and made much of the Melchizedek-Messiah connection to support their claim that Messiah Jesus is enthroned as a high priest according to a different priestly order (hence Psalm 110 is the most frequently referenced Old Testament text in the New Testament).
- This claim obviously undermined Judaism and the Temple and its priestly ministration, and so Jews very early in the Christian era recognized the need to answer the claim that Melchizedek represented a different priestly order. Their answer wasn't to deny Torah's statement that Melchizedek was "priest of God Most High" (Genesis 14:18), but to place him within the Levitical priestly structure. They accomplished this by developing the doctrine that Melchizedek was actually Noah's son *Shem*.

This has been a traditional Jewish view since at least the second century, and is almost certainly the reason the Hebrew Masoretic Text (the oldest extant copy dates to about the 10th century) contains an altered reading of Shem's genealogy in Genesis 11; this allows Shem to still be alive during Abraham's lifetime. Because the Masoretic reading is reflected in virtually all English versions of the Old Testament, most Christians have no idea that there is a different Hebrew reading. But three sources – the *Septuagint*, the *Samaritan Pentateuch*, and the first-century Jewish historian *Flavius Josephus*, all of which interacted with Hebrew texts that predate the Masoretic Text – all agree on a genealogy that has Shem dying long before Abraham's birth (which is far more plausible than the claim that Shem survived into the ninth generation of his descendents).

A simple alteration of Shem's genealogy, then, allows him to become a contemporary of Abraham, which is essential to the claim that he was Melchizedek, given Genesis 14:18-20. That claim, in turn, served at least two important purposes in countering Christian teaching about Jesus as the Messiah:

- 1) First, it answered the early and relatively common Christian view that Melchizedek represents a *christophany* (a pre-incarnate manifestation of the second person of the Trinity). It does so by negating the Hebrews writer's assertion that Melchizedek was "without father and mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life" (7:3), which was (and is) fundamental to the christophany view. A larger effect of this negation is that it brings the epistle itself into question; if the writer was wrong about Melchizedek, and his view of Melchizedek was central to his claims concerning Jesus as Israel's Messiah, then there's no reason to trust and believe anything he said about Him.
- 2) But perhaps more importantly to a Torah Jew, making Melchizedek Shem solves the immense problem for Jewish faith and practice of a new, non-Levitical priesthood, since Shem was the ancestor of Levi. The argument, then, is that Shem, the forefather of the Hebrew people, transferred the priesthood to Abraham, who then passed it down through Isaac and Jacob to Levi and then to Aaron. Thus Melchizedek didn't represent a new, post-Levitical priesthood, but the origin of the *permanent* Levitical priesthood.

The point of the above consideration is simply to show how important the person of Melchizedek is to biblical messianism. Jesus Himself testified to that (ref. Matthew 22:41-45; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44), as did the Hebrews author and the apostolic witnesses who argued Jesus' messiahship from Psalm 110 (ref. Acts 2:1-36, in addition to the synoptic citations above; cf. also Acts 5:30-31, 7:55-56; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:28-2:6; Colossians 3:1). The New Testament writings show that the person of Melchizedek was a key part of Christian witness to Jesus as Israel's Messiah, and this is the reason he was an issue in the Jews' efforts to refute Christian claims and their use of the Jewish Scriptures.

- a. In reengaging his discussion of Melchizedek, the writer began with a brief biographical sketch (7:1-3). In terms of scriptural data for his portrait, Genesis 14:18-20 was his only source, since the person of Melchizedek is mentioned nowhere else in the Old Testament scriptures. In fact, the writer closely followed the Genesis account, noting that Melchizedek was “king of Salem” (probably ancient Jerusalem) and “priest of the Most High God,” and that he came out to Abraham to bless him after he and his men had devastated the forces of four-king alliance (7:1; cf. Genesis 14:1-19). The writer also mentioned that Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek (7:2; Genesis 14:20), and added his own commentary about Melchizedek’s name and kingship: His name means *king of righteousness*, and because Salem is related to the Hebrew word *shalom* (peace), Melchizedek was also the *king of peace*.

But then he added a further description that isn’t found in the Genesis account: Melchizedek was “*without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life*” (7:3a). Christians and theologians through the centuries have puzzled over this, not only in terms of the writer’s meaning, but how he arrived at this insight. These are separate questions, but inseparable, in that neither can be answered without answering the other one.

The question of how the writer obtained this insight is the place to begin, for this is key to what he meant by his assertion. And there are three possible answers to this question: The writer either gained his insight from the Genesis text itself, it was conveyed to him by divine revelation, or it reflected a traditional Jewish understanding. All three views have their adherents, and each has its supporting arguments:

- 1) The writer’s claims about Melchizedek do parallel Jewish traditions of that time. Desiring to make Judaism more accessible and attractive to Gentiles, Jews of Alexandria, Egypt (a major cosmopolitan center in the pre-Christian world) produced the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) over the two centuries prior to Jesus’ birth. They also promoted a view of Melchizedek that served their proselytizing goals. The Jewish Encyclopedia explains it this way: “*To the Jewish propagandists of Alexandria, who were eager to win proselytes for Judaism without submitting them to the rite of circumcision, Melchizedek appealed with especial force as a type of the monotheist of the pre-Abrahamic time or of non-Jewish race, like Enoch. Like Enoch, too, he was apotheosized [exalted to glorified or divine status]. He was placed in the same category with Elijah, the Messiah ben Joseph, and the Messiah ben David. The singular feature of supernatural origin is ascribed to all four, in that they are described as being ‘without father and without mother, without*

descent, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like unto the son of God abiding forever.’ According to Midrash Tehillim to Psalm xxxvii., Abraham learned the practice of charity from Melchizedek. Philo speaks of him as ‘the logos, the priest whose inheritance is the true God.’”

As well, a Dead Sea Scroll fragment indicates that the Essenes viewed Melchizedek as a divine being, while the 1st century writing, 2 Enoch, presents him as supra-human, if not quasi-divine.

- 2) The divine revelation view finds its primary support in the fact that the Genesis account says nothing like the writer’s assertion. And since there is no other scriptural text from which he could have derived this understanding, it must have come from the Spirit. This view, in turn, fits well with the idea that Melchizedek was a pre-incarnate christophany, which the writer seems to hint at in his comment that Melchizedek was “made like the Son of God.”
- 3) At first glance, the view that the writer gained his insight from the Genesis account itself seems to be the least plausible. For, again, the text says nothing that remotely resembles what he asserted about Melchizedek. But the account in Genesis *does* support this view, if one considers the *way it presents* Melchizedek, rather than simply what it says about him. For the Genesis writer introduced him abruptly with no biographical information or description beyond his kingship and priesthood. He appears instantaneously out of nowhere, and just as quickly disappears, never to be seen or mentioned again. The text presents Melchizedek as a shadowy, mysterious figure with no links to the past or the future, other than the perpetuity of his priesthood, as indicated by Psalm 110.

Though it’s certainly appealing to conclude that Melchizedek was a christophany, and Yahweh’s later appearance to Abraham in the form of a man lends some credence to it (cf. 18:1-22, 18:33-19:1), the context argues that the writer was simply expressing the enigma of Melchizedek in a manner that allowed him to connect him with the Priest-King he prefigured. He indicates this very thing by his comment that Melchizedek *resembled* the Son of God. Hence his meaning: *Melchizedek’s appearance with no account of his beginning or end (birth or death), or record of his genealogical lineage, suggests the perpetuity of his unique status as “king of righteousness and peace” and “priest of God Most High”(7:3b). In this way, then, Melchizedek resembles Jesus, the Son of God – the One in whom the suggestion finds its full actualization.* And it’s not at all surprising that the writer would highlight this connection, since Psalm 110 does it, and this psalm was central to his messianic perspective and his understanding of Jesus (ref. 1:13, 5:6-10, 6:19-20, 7:17-21, 10:11-13).