

- b. After providing a brief portrait of Melchizedek based on the Genesis account, the writer turned to the matter of his personal greatness (7:4-10). Once again he drew from the brief account of Melchizedek's encounter with Abraham (Genesis 14:17-20), this time to make the case for Melchizedek's superiority over the covenant patriarch. But he did so with a more significant issue in view, namely the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood over its Levitical (Aaronic) counterpart (7:11ff). His approach was two-fold: First, he used the Genesis account to show Melchizedek's preeminence relative to Abraham, and then he drew an inference from their encounter to assert the priest-king's superiority over Levi.

The way the writer demonstrated Melchizedek's superiority over Abraham was by noting two features of the episode involving the two men. The first was Abraham's gift of a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek, and the second was Melchizedek's blessing bestowed upon the patriarch. His rationale was that both actions speak to the concept of a greater and a lesser person, and both affirmed Melchizedek's superiority. Most importantly, this superiority focused on *priestly* status and function.

- The writer saw in Abraham's "tithe" to the priest-king a foreshadow of the tithes paid by the Israelites to the Levitical priests (Numbers 18:21ff), indicating that he believed the same priest-worshipper dynamic was present with Abraham's offering.
- The same foreshadowing dynamic existed with Melchizedek's blessing: It anticipated God's commission of Aaron and his priestly sons to be the agents of His blessing upon His people (cf. Numbers 6:22-27; Deuteronomy 21:5; 2 Chronicles 30).

In Israel's covenant life, tithes were paid by the lesser to the greater, and blessings were bestowed upon the lesser by the greater (7:7). And though priests weren't the only ones who bestowed blessing, the priesthood is the issue of superiority here; the priests received the people's tithes, and they pronounced God's blessing upon them. This is the perspective behind the writer's argument, and these Hebrew readers understood and shared it.

Melchizedek was superior to Abraham as God's priest, but this wasn't the writer's main concern. Again, his goal was to demonstrate the superiority of his priesthood over its Levitical counterpart. Both Melchizedek and Aaron (and his priestly sons) served the Most High God as priests, but not with equal status or ultimacy. Melchizedek's priesthood preceded Aaron's, and, in a certain sense, anticipated it, and yet Aaron's priesthood was inferior. *Though it came later in history and built on the foundation of Melchizedek's priesthood, Aaron's priesthood actually prefigured and prepared for Melchizedek's – not as that priesthood had existed with Melchizedek himself, but as it looked to another priest of the same order.*

The second part of the writer's argument was his primary point in this section, namely the relationship between Melchizedek and Levi. And his concern with that relationship looked beyond it to the priesthoods and priestly ministrations each of the two men represented. The main line of his reasoning is that both Levi and his priesthood (which originated with Levi's descendent Aaron) were grounded in Abraham, and specifically God's covenant relationship with him. On the other hand, Melchizedek wasn't related to Abraham, and his priesthood predated the Levitical counterpart that flowed from the Abrahamic Covenant. In a word, Melchizedek was priest of a different order (5:5-10, 6:17-20, 7:11-17).

As noted above, the writer made his case concerning Melchizedek and Levi by means of an inference drawn from Abraham's "tithe" of the spoils of his conquest (Genesis 14:20), and the way such offerings operated in Israel's experience as the Abrahamic covenant household. He started from the premise that tithes are paid by the lesser individual to the greater one, which implies that the Levitical priests enjoyed a preeminence over the people of Israel, though both were equally covenant children of Abraham. Levi thus was superior to his brethren, in that God appointed his offspring to collect the tithes from all of Abraham's other children (7:5). Levi enjoyed priestly preeminence over the rest of Abraham's household, *but the fact that he, too, was a child of Abraham established his inferiority to Melchizedek*. The writer demonstrated this through three considerations:

- 1) First is the fact that Melchizedek wasn't part of Abraham's family; if he were, he couldn't possess priestly superiority over Levi, since God granted that superiority to Levi with respect to the *entire* Abrahamic household. Abrahamic descent would have afforded Melchizedek only two possibilities: shared priestly preeminence with the Levites (if he was one of them), or the obligation to pay tithes to them as inferior to them. But Melchizedek wasn't related to Abraham, which opened the possibility that he (and his priesthood) could be superior to Levi as God's priest.
- 2) Secondly, because Levi was a descendent of Abraham, he was implicated in Abraham's offering to Melchizedek. In the writer's words, Levi was in Abraham's loins when he met Melchizedek, so that he participated in the tithe and the blessing; Levi gave the tenth to God's priest-king and received his blessing (7:9-10).
- 3) Finally, Levi's descent from Abraham meant that he shared the patriarch's mortality. So Levi's priestly offspring enjoyed their preeminence as mortal men, binding the Levitical priesthood to a fundamental transience (7:8a). But whereas those priests held their priesthood for a season, Melchizedek never passed his along. In that sense, he "lived on" as a permanent priest (7:8b; cf. 7:23-25).