

“Melchizedek”

Hebrews 5:1-11

“Melchizedek”—it’s one of those strange names in the Bible. When we pronounce many names in the Bible, we only hope we are saying them right. First of all, what we read are peoples’ attempts on the part of translators to write with our letters what were originally written in other forms of writing or Latin letters. In the Hebrew of the Old Testament, for instance, there are two letters that we just keep silent when we read them in English because we can’t duplicate the guttural sounds that they represent. Also, we can’t be sure, without any recordings of how they spoke, exactly how they pronounced the words that were written down.

“Melchizedek” appears in two different sources in the Old Testament. First he is part of a story about Abraham in Genesis. Then he is mentioned in King David’s Psalm 110. From these brief passages the writer of Hebrew says this about Melchizedek in chapter 7:

This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, the name Melchizedek means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace.” Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

Is the writer of Hebrews making a big deal about nothing?

Though Melchizedek is only briefly mentioned in the Old Testament, there was more written about him among the Jewish rabbis. He was associated with thoughts about God’s chosen one, the Messiah, what was called in Greek, “Christ.” Since that time all kinds of theories have come out about this Melchizedek, but they are just theories. They only add to the mystery and bring up more questions than answers. Think about all the theories that have come up over the years about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The more outrageous they are, the more interested people seem to be with them. So it is with theories about Melchizedek.

But why would people want those kinds of explanations? It isn’t just a matter of curiosity. It gives us the sense that we can better explain those things and have greater control over them. We like connections to make things logical and better for us to control. A famous British historian, James Burke, has made a career showing how things in history connect. For instance he uses the development of canning food to feed armies as the basis for the development of the internal combustion engine—what drives our cars.

People in Jesus’ time liked the connection between the priests and their religion. To be a priest, like Zechariah the father of John the Baptist, you had to trace your ancestry back to the tribe of Levi, the tribe of Moses’ brother Aaron who was the first high priest. The priests performed sacrifices according to the specifics given in the Old Testament. The whole book of

Leviticus is an instruction book for priests. People liked that because they felt that if they followed the rules, they would get results. God would then protect and bless them. It was a part of all those laws they tried to keep about saying the correct words, doing the assigned rituals, eating the proper foods, and associating with the right people.

Today we try to do the same with “self-help” programs. People used to buy a lot of “self-help books, but now you can get a ton of information online. The idea is that you follow the right steps and then get the right results.

But Melchizedek is so different from the Levitical priests. There is no ancestry that can be traced to him. As the writer of Hebrews says of him: “Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life.” He just came and went in that story with Abraham.

For the writer of Hebrews this means:

Just think how great Melchizedek was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people—that is, from their fellow Israelites—even though they also are descended from Abraham. This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater. In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

With that in mind the book of Hebrews describes Jesus as a priest from the order of Melchizedek, not Levi. Why? Because Jesus is a greater priest than any from Levi. They came and died. But Jesus, in the order of Melchizedek, is eternal.

The very mysterious background of Melchizedek is proof that this is something from God, not humans. When the early Christians were placed before the Jewish high council in Acts 5, many wanted to kill them. But we read these words from a man named Gamaliel:

Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.

Not knowing where they were from gave Gamaliel the concern that Jesus' disciples could be from God. And seeing where Jesus and His followers went, to spreads throughout the world—shows us He is from God. This is not something people can control or figure out. This, like salvation itself, is solely from God.

That says something to our faith. While we are tempted to have something like the priests of Levi, something we can control and use as a tool to help ourselves, our future lies in God's hands, not ours. We see this even in Jesus:

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, He offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save Him from death, and He was heard because of His reverent submission. Son though He was, He learned obedience from what He suffered and, once made perfect, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

Jesus, though He is God Himself, did not seek to control the events that led to His death on the cross. Instead He put trust in His Father to make that all happen. In doing that He not only saved us, but showed us the way we can be trusting in God, not what we think is best.

Melchizedek—a mystery to us just as God is a part from what He has shown us in His Son, Christ Jesus.