

The Book of Hebrews Study Guide

Chapter 7

One of the stylistic elements of the writer to Hebrews is the way that he introduces a concept, and then develops it fully later on. That is true regarding the subject of chapter 7—the high priesthood of Yeshua according to the order of Melchizedek. He introduced it in chapter 5 and again at the end of chapter 6. Now the time has come for him to give an in-depth argument regarding the implications.

Background (Genesis 14)

Abram (before God renamed him Abraham) had completed his journey through the land of Canaan and had settled in the area around Hebron, which today is in the west bank of the Jordan River, west of the Dead Sea and south of Jerusalem.

Genesis 14 tells of a war in which four kings from the east defeated five Canaanite kings, and they plundered the riches and food of Sodom and Gomorrah. They also took captive Lot, the nephew of Abram, who was living in Sodom. When word reached Abram about Lot, he led his own men in pursuit of the captors, caught up with them north of Damascus, and defeated them in a surprise nighttime attack. As was the custom in those days, Abram claimed as booty the riches that the kings of the east had taken from Sodom, along with freeing Lot and others that had been captured. They returned to Canaan, and they were met by the king of Sodom, which was understandable because Abram was now in possession of his riches. They are then met by an unexpected person who was not involved in anything up to this point.

The name Melchizedek is a compound of *melech*, meaning “king” and *tsedek*, meaning “righteousness.” So his name could be “Righteous King” or “King of Righteousness.” We are also told about the region that he ruled, because he is called the King of Salem (Peace), which is the name of the Jebusite city that would later become Jerusalem. But this particular king was not like those who worshiped Canaanite deities like Baal or Asherah or Moloch, with all of the idolatrous practices that were involved. Melchizedek worshiped *El Elyon*—“God Most High.”

A number of biblical passages use this term when describing the true God in ancient settings.

- Later in this chapter (v. 22), *El Elyon* is called, “possessor of heaven and earth,” which has the sense of the Creator.
- Deuteronomy 32:8 states that “the Most High gave the nations their inheritance,” which has universal implications.
- When Lucifer fell from heaven and became Satan, according to Isaiah 14:13-14, he said: “I will make myself like the Most High.” That event took place at some point in the far distant past.
- Even Abraham and the other patriarchs may not have known the personal name of God (*YHWH*) because Exodus 6:3 states that God did not make His name known to them until 600 years after Abraham, when Moses received it at the burning bush.

So *El Elyon* is likely a term that was universally familiar in the Ancient Near East because it is used in reference to events at the beginning of time. That means Melchizedek revered the true God of creation, known to him as *El Elyon*. So this is an important distinction. Melchizedek did not

worship false Canaanite deities. He worshiped *El Elyon*, God Most High the Creator. We are also told in Genesis 14:18 that Melchizedek was a priest of *El Elyon*. Being both a king and a priest was a very unusual combination.

In his meeting with Abram and the king of Sodom, Melchizedek brought with him some bread and wine as a measure of hospitality. Then he offered two blessings—one for Abram and one for *El Elyon*. The Hebraic concept of blessing is based on a recognition of goodness. You could bless a person by granting them some kind of goodness in life, which in this context, it was a priestly blessing, seeking goodness in the life of Abram. Or you could bless God by recognizing his goodness to us. In that way, it is more like a praise.

In turn, Abram gave a tithe to Melchizedek. This would have been from the spoils of war that Abram had won in battle. According to Genesis 14:21, the king of Sodom understood that the material now belonged to Abram by protocol, so he just requested the return of his people. Abram then declared that he will keep none of the spoils for himself. After giving a tenth to Melchizedek, he let the men who fought in the battle take the rest.

The identity of Melchizedek (7:1-3)

The writer to Hebrews summarizes the details from Genesis 14 in the first two verses of chapter 7.

v. 3 – Then he draws some conclusions that go beyond the stated details in Genesis, saying first that Melchizedek is without father, mother and genealogy, and having neither a beginning nor end to life. Often in the *Tanakh* (Old Testament), people are described by their personal name and the name of their father. But Melchizedek is not described in that manner, nor is he listed in any genealogy anywhere. Likewise, the births and deaths of leading characters are typically recorded in Scripture, but nowhere is that given for Melchizedek. So the author is highlighting that omission.

There are two possibilities for his reasoning. Either Melchizedek literally had no earthly parents and always existed, or this verse is typological in nature, meaning he is bringing out symbolic content from the text in Genesis 14, so that the intentional omission of details represents a concept. Everything that follows continues in the same manner. Either it is literal or typological. If it is literal, Melchizedek is God Himself – without beginning or ending. That would make his appearance a theophany—a manifestation of God in human form. If it is typological, Melchizedek is a man who represents the eternal God without actually being God.

The evidence for Melchizedek being a theophany is as follows:

- The attributes of his name—righteousness and peace—are associated with the Messiah (Jer 23:6; Isa 9:6).
- Abram allowed himself to be blessed by Melchizedek.
- In Hebrews 7:8, Melchizedek is contrasted with “mortal men.”
- Among the Dead Sea Scrolls is a first century B.C. work that makes the conclusion that Melchizedek was God (11Q13).

The evidence against Melchizedek being a theophany includes:

- His name does not mandate a divine identity. In Joshua 10:1, for example another king is named Adonizedek, meaning “Righteous Lord” and he is not considered to be divine.

- The omission of birth and death records does not mean it literally refers to eternity. Instead, the figurative nature of typography in Scripture allows it to be symbolic of a principle.
- Hebrews 7:3 says that Melchizedek was “made *like* the Son of God,” not “he *is* the Son of God.” That phrasing is more consistent with typology.
- Unlike theophanies, Abram and the king of Sodom do not respond with any recognition of Melchizedek’s being divine, like Jacob wrestling with a man, but saying afterward, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been spared (Gen 32:30), or like Gideon saying a similar statement after speaking to the angel of the LORD, and then he built an altar and offered up a sacrifice (Judg 6:22-26). We see nothing like that regarding Melchizedek—no verbal declaration or no act of worship. Tithing was not an act of worship, for it was common to give tithes to priests.
- Unlike theophanies that are always brief appearances, Melchizedek has been functioning as both a king and a priest, which implies long term roles spanning a lifetime.
- The Son of God is described in Ps 100:4 as a priest “according to the order of Melchizedek,” not according to the order of yourself.
- Lastly, it is obvious that Hebrews 7:10 can only be interpreted symbolically, not literally. In order to interpret the whole passage in a consistent manner, verse 3 must also be viewed symbolically, which is a key verse for establishing the nature of Melchizedek.

In the end, it seems best to consider Melchizedek as being a real man that God raised up so that he could serve as a type of a divine priest-king, and the combination of specific details coupled with the omission of other details allowed the writer to Hebrews to describe the typology associated with the man. That gets to the purpose behind this inclusion in Scripture. Ultimately this is not about the identity of Melchizedek; it is about the priesthood of Yeshua. The author is showing that a precedent had been set for a superior kind of priesthood than the Levitical order, and Yeshua is the one who fulfills it in totality.

The superiority of the priesthood of Melchizedek (7:4-10)

- v. 4 – The author begins interpreting the details of Genesis 14 by pointing out the greatness of Abraham. He was the patriarch—the father of the nation of Israel. He was the one who received the covenant from God on behalf of the people. He was also the only person called “the friend of God” (Jas 2:23; cf. 2 Chr 20:7). In spite of his perceived greatness, the author then shows that Melchizedek is greater than Abraham because Melchizedek is the one who received a tithe from Abraham, not the other way around. But he doesn’t just make this observation as a way of showing superiority to Abraham. This is the first point in his argument that the priesthood of Yeshua is superior to the Levitical priesthood.
- v. 5 – So he refers to the commandment in Numbers 18:21-24 the descendants of Abraham were instructed to give one-tenth of everything they produced to the Levites.
- v. 6 – But in the case of Melchizedek, he wasn’t a descendant of Abraham, yet he is the one who received the tithe. This implies a standing that is even higher than the Torah.
- v. 7 – He points out that Melchizedek was the one who gave the blessing, which is further evidence of superiority.

- v. 8 – The Levitical priests were also inferior because they died and had to be replaced, while Melchizedek lives on typologically.
- v. 9 – The author brings up the fact that the Levites had to pay a tithe of the tithes that they received (to Aaron). That is part of the Torah in Numbers 18:28. Yet there is no indication that Melchizedek has that same obligation.
- v. 10 – Lastly, he observes that Levi was considered to have paid a tithe to Melchizedek, because he “was in Abraham’s loins.” That may make no sense to us today. But that is definitely consistent with the Hebraic understanding of interconnectedness of descendants across the generations.

Taken together, these points constitute a sophisticated argument, under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, that demonstrates the superiority of Melchizedek to Abraham and his descendants, including the Levitical priests, because of the identity of the givers and the receiver of tithes. In other words, Abraham may be superior to the Levitical priests, but Melchizedek is superior to them both.

The perfection of the Messianic priesthood of Yeshua (7:11-24)

- v. 11 – The logic is simple – if the Levitical priesthood was perfect, there would be no need for another way through the order of Melchizedek.
- v. 12 – Since the Levitical priesthood is a fundamental aspect of the Torah, changes to that priesthood will have an impact on the entire Law of Moses.
- vv. 13-14 – One of those changes involves eligibility for the priesthood. According to the Law, priests could only come from the tribe of Levi, while kings could only come from the tribe of - - - Judah. Yeshua is identified as a being a descendant of Judah, which is consistent with his genealogies in Matthew and Luke. So He is entitled to the kingship of Israel according to His physical heritage. But according to the Law, He could not be a priest.
- v. 15 – The only other way for that to occur was through the priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek.
- v. 16 – Since the typology of Melchizedek includes the concept of an unending life, for someone to be eligible for that order of priesthood, you would have to be indestructible (KJV, endless). It is an expression of divinity. The only one who meets that criteria is Yeshua (in the case of Melchizedek it was only true in a symbolic, typological sense).
- v. 17 – This reality being described is the fulfillment of the prophetic 110th Psalm, which the author quotes here. As shown in Hebrews 1, the context of Psalm 110 demonstrates the divine nature of the Messiah as the Son of God. In verse 4 of this Psalm, Adonai declares that the Son is “a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” Adonai could make that declaration because the Son alone meets the indestructible, unending nature of the type associated with Melchizedek. That is why it was impossible for the Messiah to be a mere mortal. Under the Law, the Messiah could be a king, but not a priest. But as one who was fully human, from the tribe of Judah, and at the same time fully divine and thus eternal, Yeshua alone could be both king and priest. And that is the fulfillment of another Messianic prophecy in Zechariah 6:12-13, in which the Messiah is depicted as both king and priest.

vv. 18-19 – The author’s description of a “former commandment” is a reference to the way that priests were determined by their physical heritage (Ex 28:1). The author calls that commandment weak and useless because it was based on a physical heritage, it was always vulnerable. And history would prove that out shortly when the temple would be destroyed, making the Levitical priesthood unnecessary, and the scattering of the people would make verification of that heritage difficult.

Moreover, it was imperfect because it was dependent on flawed human beings. Romans 7:7 shows that the Law itself was all about making known the extent of sin. So it might be said that in spite of the goodness of the commandments themselves, flawed human nature complicates matters. Ultimately that means the Law ends up enabling us to identify what is imperfect. So the author goes on to show how Yeshua offers us a better hope than the Law alone could ever do.

vv. 20-24 – We are given another reason for the superior nature of the priesthood of Yeshua. Levitical priests did not enter their office by virtue of any kind of oath, but it was true regarding Yeshua. The author refers again to Psalm 110:4, only this time he quotes the first half of the verse that he did not include earlier in Hebrews 7:17, namely “Adonai has sworn [an oath].” In that culture, oaths were irrevocable. That reinforces the enduring nature of Yeshua’s priesthood, which contrasts greatly with the turnover among priests because of death, as well as the complete demise of the Levitical priesthood that was about to take place with the destruction of the temple.

Altogether, this argument shows that the eligibility of Yeshua for the priesthood does not contradict the Torah. He just becomes eligible outside of the Torah, by virtue of God’s separate oath. But the great distinction is the permanence of Yeshua’s priesthood. So the author is making it clear that this day was prophetically foretold, and the priesthood of Yeshua is just another way that Judaism with the Messiah is better than Judaism without Him.

If Yeshua did not qualify and fulfill His role as high priest, that would mean we would be back where things were before Yeshua. We would have to rely on a mortal high priest to carry out atonement on our behalf. But that would be a real problem because there is no suitable place to do it, and no one can prove their hereditary eligibility. In other words, we wouldn’t even have the capability of receiving temporary atonement, let alone permanent atonement. That is where unbelieving Jewish people are at today, even though they mistakenly believe they have atonement without sacrifice. This is why it is so important that Yeshua was high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

The superior ministry of the Messianic priesthood of Yeshua (7:25-28)

v. 25 – Having established the qualifications of Yeshua as high priest, the author then describes the results of His ministry. Priests had two roles – to carry out redemptive obligations and to intercede for people. We see both of those roles in this verse. The redemptive aspect typically involved atonement, which is part of salvation, because it represents the covering of our sin.

Here in this verse, the verb translated as “to save” is in the present active form. It is not about a moment in time, but it is a description of continuing action. Thus it is a saving power that endures throughout a lifetime and on into eternity. Another way of phrasing this

verse is that Yeshua saves us continually, not in the sense of having to do it over and over again as a result of disobedience or falling away, but His continual salvation is without end.

Notice also that “*he is able* to save.” The word translated as “able” is *dunamai*, which is related to the Greek word for power (*dunamis*). So Yeshua is the active agent in salvation, which once again reinforces the emphasis being placed entirely on Him in bringing it about and sustaining it, not whether we fail in some way and lose it.

That is a statement of *what* He does. But *why* is He able to save forever (KJV, uttermost)? Because He is the eternal God (power) and a high priest forever (legal authority). How long can we count on Him to intercede on our behalf? Always.

What does it mean that He is interceding for us? The Greek verb translated as “make intercession (*entunchanō*) is a legal or technical term used for approaching a king with a petition. So it is a picture of Yeshua making a statement to the Father on behalf of believers for the purpose of forgiveness, protection and meeting our needs.

- v. 26 – The author then describes the character of the intercessor. This is important because the character of the one doing the intercession contributes to the expectation that the petition will be granted. Thus, Yeshua as the only one who is holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens has perfect integrity and is trustworthy in what He requests. He is the perfect high priest in every way.
- v. 27 – And that means His redemptive ministry is perfect. The author introduces the concept of Yeshua’s sacrifice “once for all” here, and that will be addressed as a major theme a bit later in the book.
- v. 28 – The chapter concludes with a definitive statement of contrast. The Levitical priesthood is inferior because it based on the Law (which reveals sin), and is dependent on men who are weak due to sin and death, thus making it vulnerable to failure. On the other hand, the priesthood of Messiah is based on a direct oath from God (which is the highest authority), and is appointed to Yeshua who is perfect, thus enduring forever.