

## Jesus – Priest in the order of Melchizedek

**Reading: Hebrews 5:8-10** “...*He was a Son...High Priest...order of Melchizedek.*”

### **Introduction:**

Melchizedek is a name that pops up in a couple of verses in the Old Testament, and is mentioned several times in the book of Hebrews. His name first appears in **Genesis 14:18**, and if he was never mentioned again, then I guess that we could view him as just another passing character in the pages of Biblical history.

But in the book of **Hebrews**, his name is linked with Jesus. **Hebrews 6:20** says that; “...*where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.*”<sup>1</sup>. When you read this verse, it raises the level of significance of Melchizedek in the scriptures.

Looking at what the Hebrew writer goes on to say about Melchizedek and Jesus, we can see that the above verse doesn't mean that Jesus is a priest under an order set up by Melchizedek. Rather, the Hebrew writer uses the priesthood of Melchizedek as a background to explain the priesthood of Jesus – the writer does so by showing the similarities between the priesthood of Melchizedek, and that of Jesus. But throughout the book, the emphasis is on Jesus and the better covenant that is now in place (**Hebrews 8:6**).

So what are these similarities? In what ways is Jesus a “...*Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek*”?

In this lesson, we will look at the scriptures in order to answer these questions, and draw some application from having Jesus as our High Priest.

### **1) Melchizedek – Priest at Jerusalem**

As mentioned above, we first come across Melchizedek in **Genesis 14:18**. He is described in this verse as being the “...*king of Salem.*”, and also “...*the priest of God Most High.*”.

- Salem is the old name for the city of Jerusalem<sup>2</sup>.

The context of this passage is as follows. The timeframe is during the life of Abraham, and is after Lot had decided to separate from Abraham because of the disputes between their herdsmen. Lot had moved down from Canaan to live on the well-watered plains of the Jordan valley near the city of Sodom (**Genesis 13:1-12**). Sometime later, there was a war between the kings of the southern area around Sodom and Gomorrah, and the kings from the north (**Genesis 14:5-9**). The northern kings won, and took all the goods from Sodom and Gomorrah, along with some captives, including Lot, and proceeded to take them back up north (**Genesis 14:10-12, 16**).

Abraham got to hear about it, and with a small army of his servants, pursued these kings, caught up with them and defeated them near Damascus (**Genesis 14:13-15**). Abraham is on his way back down south with Lot and the rest of the people and possessions when Melchizedek comes out to meet him with

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

<sup>2</sup> The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Volume 5 Q-Z, page 219, “Salem”. See also **Psalms 76:2**.

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bread and wine (**Genesis (14:18)**). Melchizedek blesses Abraham and the Lord God Most High, and Abraham gave him a tithe (**Genesis 14:19-20**).

Other than the fact that he was priest to the God Most High, **Genesis** tells us no more about Melchizedek's priesthood.

We hear no more of Melchizedek until we get to the book of **Psalms**. He is mentioned in **Psalms 110:4**, and this verse is quoted more than once in the book of **Hebrews**.

### 2) Jesus' Priesthood – similarities with the Priesthood of Melchizedek

- a) Both were/are Kings, righteous kings, as well as priests

Melchizedek was a King (**Genesis 14:18; Hebrews 7:1**). – he was King of Salem, and his name means; “*king of righteousness*”<sup>3</sup>, “*king of peace*” (**Hebrews 7:2**).

While idolatry and pagan religions existed in the area during the time of Melchizedek, there were people like Melchizedek and Abraham who served the Living God.

Jesus is also a King – a righteous King (**Jeremiah 23:5-6**), the Lord of peace (**2 Thessalonians 3:16**). When He stood before Pilate in the lead-up to His crucifixion, Pilate asked Him the question; “*Are you a King, then?*” (**John 18:37a**). Jesus' response was; “*You say rightly that I am a King*” (**18:37b**).

During His earthly ministry, Jesus often spoke of and taught about a “kingdom”; a kingdom that was “*at hand*”; a kingdom that was coming soon (**Matthew 4:17, 23; Mark 9:1**). We see from the New Testament that the kingdom and the church are one and the same (*e.g.* **Matthew 16:18-19; Acts 2**). Jesus is the Head of the church (**Ephesians 1:22**). He is also King in His Kingdom (**John 18:36**) - a kingdom that will be handed back to the Father at the end of time (**1 Corinthians 15:24**).

But while Melchizedek had an earthly kingdom, Jesus' kingdom is different – it is not of this world (**John 18:36**). He is King of a spiritual kingdom; a kingdom of those who have become children of God (**Colossians 1:13**).

- b) Neither had a priestly genealogy

There is no Biblical record of Melchizedek's mother or father – he just turns up in **Genesis** with no prior Biblical history given. **Hebrews 7:3** says;

*“Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life.....”*

Under the Old Covenant, genealogy was important when it came to the priesthood. Those wanting to be priests had to show that they were descended from Levi. There is a case in **Nehemiah 7:63-64** where some were excluded from being priests because their genealogy could not be demonstrated<sup>4</sup> (see also **Ezra 2:61-62**).

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<sup>3</sup> The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Volume 4 M-P, page 177, “Melchizedek”.

<sup>4</sup> The main context of this event is the listing of people who returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, but the issue of genealogy is mentioned in passing.

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But the genealogy for Melchizedek is totally lacking. He was certainly not a descendant of Levi<sup>5</sup>, and as such, his priesthood set a precedent for the type of priesthood that Jesus took on centuries later.

- Jesus, also, was not of the genealogy of Levi (**Matthew 1:1-16**).

### c) Neither served as priests under the Levitical priesthood

Melchizedek was not a priest under the Levitical system. In fact, when we read about him in **Genesis 14**, the Levitical priesthood was still about 600 years<sup>6</sup> away into the future;

- Levi wasn't even born when Abraham met Melchizedek – he was still in his loins (**Hebrews 7:9-10**).
- You have the timeframe for the generations Abraham → Isaac → Jacob → Levi (**Genesis 21:3; 25:19-26; 29:28-34**).
- Then you have the 400 years in Egypt (**Genesis 15:13; Acts 7:6**)
- Finally, the Levitical priesthood was set up during the wilderness wanderings after the Hebrews left Egypt (**Numbers 3:5-13**)

Jesus also, was not, and is not, a priest in the Levitical order.

When He was living here as a man on earth, not only was He not a Levitical priest, He could not be a priest at all, as **Hebrews 7** and **8** explain.

Firstly, Jesus could not be a part of the Levitical priesthood system.

When Jesus was here on earth, the Old Covenant was still in place (**Matthew 5:17-19**<sup>7</sup>). Now we know from the Old Testament scriptures that God had chosen men from the tribe of Levi to serve as priests and to officiate at the tabernacle (**Numbers 3:5-13**). But that is not the reason the **Hebrews** writer gives for Jesus not serving as a priest under the Old Law. The reason that the writer does give here in **Hebrews 7:13-14** is this;

*“<sup>13</sup>For He of whom these things are spoken (i.e. Jesus – SK) belongs to another tribe, from which no man has officiated at the altar. <sup>14</sup>For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood.”*

In other words, the reason why Jesus could not be a priest under the Old Law was this:- Jesus belonged to the tribe of Judah, but Moses<sup>8</sup> had said nothing about men from the tribe of Judah being priests.

*i.e.* Moses did not specifically say that the men of Judah *could* be priests. Moses did not specifically say that they *couldn't* be priests. He said nothing regarding the tribe of Judah in this matter.

Therefore, Jesus could not take on the role of being a priest back then and justify it by saying; “*Well, the Law doesn't specifically say that I can't be a priest*”.

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<sup>5</sup> Levi wasn't even born when Abraham met Melchizedek. Levi was Abraham's great grandson.

<sup>6</sup> Ishmael was born sometime ( ? years) after Abraham met Melchizedek, and Isaac was born 14 years later (**Genesis 16:16; 17:17-19**). Isaac was 60 when Jacob was born (**Genesis 25:26**). Jacob was 130 when the family moved to Egypt (**Genesis 47:9**). Then there was the 400 years in Egypt (**Acts 7:6**). Total time = ? + 14 + 60 + 130 + 400 = 604<sup>+</sup> years.

<sup>7</sup> Jesus had to die before the New Covenant could come into effect – **Hebrews 9:15-17**.

<sup>8</sup> Moses was the person through whom God spoke regarding the Old Law (**John 1:17a**).

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Secondly, the next chapter shows that Jesus could not be a priest on earth in parallel with the existing priesthood system. We read in **Hebrews 8:4** ;

*“For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the Law”.*

From this verse, we conclude that God only wants one priesthood in place at a time. There was already a priesthood in place – the Levitical one. If Jesus had been a priest on earth back then, it would have meant that there would have been two priesthoods operating here at the same time. Having been disqualified from being part of the Levitical priesthood (**Hebrews 7:13-14**), Jesus could not then chose to be a priest in parallel with that priesthood.

And so to conclude;

- **Hebrews 7:13-14** tells us why Jesus could not be part of the existing Levitical priesthood – *i.e.* Moses had said nothing about men from Judah being priests, and,
- **Hebrews 8:4** tells us that He could not be a priest and serve in parallel with the Levitical priesthood.

(Note: We see here the humility and obedience of Jesus. In our eyes, if ever there was anyone who would qualify as being a priest, it would surely be Jesus, the Son of God. But from the above passages, we see that Jesus did not usurp the Word of God, but humbly submitted Himself to it – obedience to the Father’s Will was paramount. *e.g.* **Luke 22:42**; **Philippians 2:5-8**.)

From what we see here in **Hebrews 7:13-14** and **8:4**, plus what we know from the scriptures that talk about the Levites being chosen to be priests, we can see two Biblical principles at work here;

- i. The first principle is this: When it comes to matters of faith and practice, the fact that God has not specifically said that something should not be done, does not automatically mean that we are free to go ahead and do it.  
For example, Jesus could not take on the priesthood under the Old Covenant and justify it by saying; “*Well, God didn’t specifically say that I couldn’t.*” Now there are times when the lack of any specific Biblical instruction does give us the freedom to do things the way we best see fit<sup>9</sup>. But the point is this:- it would be a mistake to automatically assume that because God hasn’t specifically said that we can’t do a particular thing, that it means that it is OK for us to go ahead and do it.
- ii. The second principle is this: In matters of faith and practice, when God has made a choice about how something is to be done, then all other options or alternative methods are “off the agenda”, without

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<sup>9</sup> For example, there is the command to “*Go forth and teach every nation....*” (**Matthew 28:19**). But God has not specified that any particular mode of travel should be used, nor is there anything in the scriptures to indicate that the mode of travel is important. Therefore, we are free to choose whatever mode of travel that best fits the purpose of “*Going forth and teach*”.

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God having to also say; “I don’t want you to do it this way or that way”.

For example, once God had said that men from the tribe of Levi were to be priests, He didn’t also have to specifically say; “*I don’t want the men from Judah doing it.*” “*I don’t want the men from Simeon doing it*”, “*I don’t want the men from Reuben doing it*”, etc. When God has made a choice about how something is to be done, then that’s it - period.

### 3) The new Priesthood

From what we see in **Hebrews 7:11-12**, there needed to be a change in priesthood because the Levitical system did not bring about perfection – in fact, the Old Law and its priesthood were only a shadow of what was to come (**Hebrews 10:1**). For Jesus to be a priest, there needed to be a change in the type of priesthood. And a change in priesthood required a change in law – a new law; a new covenant was required.

Based on what we saw in **Hebrews 7:13-14** and **8:4**, this change had to take place if Jesus was to be our priest.

When Jesus was nailed to the cross, the Old Law and its ordinances were done away (**Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 2:14**). In **Hebrews 8:13**, the writer says;

*“In that He says, “A new covenant.”, He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”*

The Old Law was vanishing away<sup>10</sup>, and along with it, the Levitical priesthood. A new covenant was now in place, and a new priesthood. We now have Jesus as our High Priest, seated not here on earth, but at the right hand of our Father in Heaven (**Hebrews 1:3; 8:1**).

Therefore, what does having Jesus as our High Priest mean for us? What impact does this have on our spiritual lives?

### Application: What this new Priesthood means for us

- a) He has offered the perfect sacrifice for sins – making us clean and whole.

One role of the priest was to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people (**Hebrews 5:1**). But the continual sacrifices under the Old Covenant, while they were commanded and had a role to play in sanctification (**Hebrews 9:13**), could not, in and of themselves, take away sins (**Hebrews 10:4, 11**).

But the sacrifice that Jesus offered does take away our sins. He offered, not the blood of animals, but His own blood. And He only had to do it once. **Hebrews 10:12, 14** state;

*“But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God.....For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified”.*

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<sup>10</sup> If the Hebrew letter was written before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, then the letter was written at a time when the Jews in Jerusalem were still holding to the Old Law and the Levitical priesthood (**Hebrews 8:4b**). But with the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 A.D., it all came to an end.

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Spiritually, we have been made perfect because of the sacrifice He offered on our behalf. Even today, 2000 years later, that one sacrifice of His blood continues to cleanse us when we repent and confess our sins to the Father (**Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:7,9**). The result is that we can then stand before God “...*holy, ...blameless, and above reproach*” (**Colossians 1:22**).

### b) We can confidently approach the throne of God

Before we obeyed the gospel, our sins separated us from God (**Isaiah 59:2; Romans 6:23a**). But through the blood of Jesus, we who were once afar off have now been reconciled to the Father (**Colossians 1:20**).

- rather than being strangers and aliens (**Ephesians 2:19**), we are now part of His family (**Galatians 4:5-6**); we are His children (**1 Peter 1:14**).

God still hates sin, but when we sin, we have an advocate (**1 John 2:1**) – someone who can plead our case to the Father – Jesus Christ the righteous. Jesus is the only one through whom we can go to the Father (**John 14:6**). With Jesus as our High Priest, we have someone who can sympathise with our weakness because He has faced the same trials and temptations that we do – except that He didn’t give in to temptations (**Hebrews 4:15**).

And so, as **Hebrews 4:16** says, we can “...*come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*”

This term “*boldly*” does not mean that we approach God in an arrogant manner, but “*confidently, freely, openly*<sup>11</sup>”. If we come to Him with a humble and penitent heart, we can be confident that He will extend His grace and mercy towards us (**Psalms 51:17; James 4:6**).

### c) He is our permanent High Priest

Under the Levitical priesthood system, there had to be a new High Priest chosen at various intervals because of death (**Hebrews 7:23**). But Jesus lives forever – He is no longer bound by the constraints of living in the flesh. Having been raised from the dead, death has no power over Him (**Romans 6:9**).

Therefore, His priesthood will continue forever (**Hebrews 7:17**) – there won’t be any changes. This perfect High Priest (**Hebrews 5:9**), this sinless High Priest (**Hebrews 4:15**), this unchangeable High Priest (**Hebrews 13:8**), this saving High Priest (**Hebrews 7:25**), is always there, ready to intercede on our behalf, for our benefit.

When the Bible talks about Jesus being a High Priest in the order of Melchizedek, the focus is on Jesus, not on Melchizedek. The Hebrew writer used Melchizedek’s priesthood to explain the Priesthood of Jesus. But the Priesthood of Jesus is far superior to that of Melchizedek’s, and that of the Old Law (**Hebrews 7:19, 22, 26; 8:2, 6; 9:11, 24**).

### **Hebrews 10:19-23**

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<sup>11</sup> Strong’s Concordance, Greek word number 3954