

Hebrews 7:1-3, 6-8

“Melchizedek Compared to Yeshua”

“For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all *the spoils*, was first of all, by the translation of *his name*, king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace. Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually...But the one whose genealogy is not traced from them collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed the one who had the promises. But without any dispute the lesser is blessed by the greater. In this case mortal men receive tithes, but in that case one *receives them*, of whom it is witnessed that he lives on.”

Hebrews 7:1-10:18 forms much of the core of the epistle, as the author wants to demonstrate to his audience how Yeshua the Messiah is able to hold the office of priest, and that there is indeed a legitimate precedent for it.¹⁷⁶ This precedent is found in the relatively elusive individual of Melchizedek, who appears only once in the Tanach (Genesis 14:18-20). Melchizedek was a major figure in the theology of the First Century Pharisees, the Qumran community, as well as the Diaspora Jewish community. Comparing the role that Yeshua plays to the function of Melchizedek from the ancient past, could be readily identified by a broad Jewish audience both native and non-native to the Land of Israel.

Of particular importance to our examination will be Hebrews 7:1-10, which Lane indicates “assumes the form of homiletical midrash.”¹⁷⁷ He goes on to say that the “basis of the midrash in 7:1-10 is the hermeneutical principal of *gezera sawa*, that is, if two separate passages of Scripture contain the same word, the verbal analogy provides a sufficient reason for explaining one text in light of the other.”¹⁷⁸ In this case, the identity of Melchizedek and the role that Melchizedek played in relation to Abraham (Hebrews 7:1) are considered in light of the present function of Yeshua the Messiah and various aspects of His salvation work. Our writer picks up where he left off in Hebrews 5:11, having previously observed that “There is much we have to say about this matter, but it is hard to explain to you, because you are so slow to understand” (Good News Bible). He doubts that his audience, whomever they may be, will fully comprehend what he is trying to communicate. Consequently, we should not be surprised today if we have some difficulty as well, understanding some of the comparisons and contrasts between Melchizedek and Yeshua.

Abraham met Melchizedek as his nephew Lot was caught in the middle of the War of the Kings. In the midst of this conflict, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were invaded and Lot and his possessions were taken as spoil. Abraham heard of this and led a band to free him. Abraham was successful (Genesis 14:1-17), and on his return encountered Melchizedek, giving him a tenth of the booty that he had captured while freeing Lot:

“And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said, ‘Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.’ He gave him a tenth of all” (Genesis 14:18-20).

This is referenced by the author of Hebrews:

¹⁷⁶ This entry has been adapted from the author’s commentary *Hebrews for the Practical Messianic*.

¹⁷⁷ Lane, *Hebrews*, 47a:158.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

“[T]o whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all *the spoils*, was first of all, by the translation of *his name*, king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace” (Hebrews 7:2).

Not much is said in the actual Genesis account about Melchizedek, but it is apparently enough for our author to build a case for the work of Yeshua. Melchizedek is identified as both a king *and* a priest, the two principal roles that Yeshua is portrayed as having. Melchizedek is a priest of “God Most High” or *El Alyon* (אֱלֹהֵי אֲלֹנִים).¹⁷⁹ Hagner states, “Melchizedek is thus regarded as a legitimate priest outside of Israel,”¹⁸⁰ as the priesthood in which Yeshua operates from Heaven definitely serves all of humanity. Guthrie observes how “Any priesthood is evaluated according to the status of the deity who is served, which means that Melchizedek’s must have been of a highly exalted kind.”¹⁸¹

Genesis 14:20 is the first account seen of tithing in the Bible. The Patriarch Abraham recognized who Melchizedek was as a priest of the One True God and gave him what was his due. The two characteristics that our author focuses on are seen in the etymology of the name *Malki-Tzedeq* (מַלְכֵי צְדָקָה; Grk. trans. *Melchisedek*, Μελχισέδεκ), as he asserts, “His name, in the first place, means ‘king of righteousness’; next he is also king of Salem, that is, ‘king of peace’” (Hebrews 7:2, NRSV). It is important to realize that the author of Hebrews provides a translation of Melchizedek’s name, as this is strong internal evidence that his letter was not originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic, but instead Greek. In fact, we see some distinct parallels and contrasts between his wording in Hebrews 7:2 and what the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo says about Melchizedek:

“Moreover, God made Melchisedek, the king of peace, that is of Salem, for that is the interpretation of this name, ‘his own high priest,’ without having previously mentioned any particular action of his, but merely because he had made him a king, and a lover of peace, and especially worthy of his priesthood. For he is called a just king, and a king is the opposite of a tyrant, because the one is the interpreter of law, and the other of lawlessness” (*Allegorical Interpretation* 3.79).¹⁸²

Yeshua the Messiah Himself, of course, is prophesied as demonstrating both of the key character traits of righteousness and peace:

“For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; and the government will rest on His shoulders; and His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be no end to the increase of *His* government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this” (Isaiah 9:6-7).

“Behold, *the days are coming*,” declares the LORD, “When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, “The LORD our righteousness”” (Jeremiah 23:5-6).

The Hebrew terms *tzedeq* (צְדָקָה) or *tzedaqah* (צְדָקָה), meaning “rightness” or “righteousness,” correspond via the Septuagint to the Greek term *dikaionē* (δικαιοσύνη), employed by our author (also at times meaning “justice”). But perhaps the more significant term is the connection

¹⁷⁹ Grk. LXX and NT: *tau Theou tou hupsitou* (τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου).

¹⁸⁰ Hagner, in *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, 2160.

¹⁸¹ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 155.

¹⁸² *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 59.

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of Salem with “peace.” *Shalem* (שָׁלֵם)¹⁸³ is almost always associated as being synonymous with the city of Jerusalem, *Yerushalayim* (יְרוּשָׁלַיִם) or the “city of peace” (cf. Psalm 76:2). Yeshua, of course, is the Prince of Peace, a title employed for Him in the Apostolic Scriptures (Luke 1:79; Ephesians 2:14).

There are some key contrasts between the Hebrew and Greek terms for “peace.” The common Greek term for peace, *eirēnē* (εἰρήνη) “is the opposite of *pólemos* (‘war’). It is linked with treaties of peace or the conclusion of peace” (TDNT).¹⁸⁴ In a solely Hellenistic context, *eirēnē* often just means absence of war. *Shalom* (שָׁלוֹם) “means much more than mere absence of war. Rather, the root meaning of the verb *shālēm* better expresses the true concept of *shālôm*. Completeness, wholeness, harmony, fulfillment, are closer to the meaning. Implicit in *shālôm* is the idea of unimpaired relationships with others and fulfillment in one’s undertakings” (TWOT).¹⁸⁵ While *shalom* is rendered as *eirēnē* in the LXX, and this usage carries over into the Greek Apostolic Scriptures, its association with righteousness might not totally have been clear to some of the non-Jewish members of Hebrews’ audience.

Hebrews 7:3-4 are somewhat elusive to many interpreters, as the words about Melchizedek, “He is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest for ever” (Hebrews 7:3, RSV), can be confusing. What does Melchizedek truly represent? This has certainly been a cause of much debate and discussion in the centuries and millennia following Hebrews’ composition. There is a distinct, mysterious quality about who Melchizedek was, that our author wanted his readers to understand in light of the ministry work of Yeshua.

The author of Hebrews certainly uses the ambiguity surrounding how Melchizedek’s genealogy is not addressed in the Genesis narrative, to relate to it as being a precursor to the work of Yeshua. Quanbeck indicates how “to the rabbis it was not only what God said in scripture that was to be noted but also what he did not say. The absence of vital statistics and of reference to parents is therefore used to heighten the mysterious significance of Melchizedek in the unfolding of salvation history.”¹⁸⁶ To what extent, however, this plays in identifying who Melchizedek was and what his relationship to Yeshua may be, has been argued from many different lines of thought.

Many laypersons, even in the Messianic movement, have interpreted the words “like the Son of God” and have extrapolated that the Melchizedek who encountered Abraham, was actually Yeshua (Jesus). However, the phrase *aphōmoioōmenos de tō huīō tou Theou* (ἀφομοιωμένος δὲ τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ), “being made like to the Son of God” (YLT), should not be taken as Melchizedek being a pre-incarnate manifestation of Yeshua. The verb *aphomoiōō* (ἀφομοιόω) means “to make like” and “to compare,” as well as “to portray, copy” (LS).¹⁸⁷ Melchizedek is said to be “resembling” (RSV) Yeshua, having been “made conformable to the Son of God” (NICNT).¹⁸⁸ That Melchizedek is a king who was righteous and provided peace can be certain; whether he was a pre-incarnate manifestation of Yeshua the Messiah is something else.

While Abraham gave his due respect to Melchizedek, he did not make any attempt to worship or bow before him, unlike the later incident when God actually appeared to him (Genesis 18:2). Hegg validly describes, “Those that claim that Melchizedek to be a christophony have a grave difficulty to deal with, namely, that in no other case of a pre-incarnate appearance

¹⁸³ Grk. LXX: *Salēm* (Σαλήμ).

¹⁸⁴ W. Foerster, “*eirēnē*,” in TDNT, 207.

¹⁸⁵ G. Lloyd Carr, “*shālôm*,” in TWOT, 2:931.

¹⁸⁶ Quanbeck, in *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 907.

¹⁸⁷ LS, 139.

¹⁸⁸ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 156.

of Yeshua do those people to whom He appears continue on as though talking with a mere mortal...In the Gen 14 account, Melchizedek, while standing in a very high position, is nonetheless treated as a man, not worshiped as the Divine One."¹⁸⁹

What the author of Hebrews is likely doing, however, is using an argument of silence to suggest that since the Tanach Scriptures say nothing about Melchizedek's genealogy, or his death, that his priesthood must somehow continue on. Silence in the Scriptures was actually a major feature of Alexandrian Jewish exegesis, evidenced in some of the teachings of Philo. Philo used the argument of silence to deal with the fact that the Tanach did not speak of the death of Cain. While Cain surely died a human's death, Cain's spirit of murder for his brother lives on, as it were, and continues in many people (*That the Worse Is Wont to Attack the Better* 178; *On Flight and Finding* 60). In a similar manner, the priesthood of Melchizedek may be regarded as being present and functioning in the salvation activity of Yeshua the Messiah.

Why our author mentioned Melchizedek at all, can be a cause of a great many questions when we consider the historical framework in which it was likely given. There are three distinct streams that we see within sects of Judaism of the greater First Century period that the author of Hebrews—at least to some degree—may be confronting:

1. The Qumran community viewed Melchizedek as some kind of an angelic being:

The DSS (11Q13) indicate that the Qumran community identified Melchizedek as being an exalted figure, perhaps even an angel, who would be used to bring about God's judgment in the apocalypse. A text called *The Heavenly Prince Melchizedek* indicates, "Melchizedek will avenge the vengeance of the judgments of God...and he will drag [them from the hand of] Belial and from the hand of all the sp[irits of] his [lot]....This is the day of [Peace/Salvation] concerning which [God] spoke [through Isajiah the prophet....And *your* ELOHIM is [Melchizedek who will save them from] the hand of Belial."¹⁹⁰ Ellingworth indicates that while "the original *Sitz im Leben* [Ger. Situation in Life] is lost...a cult of Melchizedek as an angel may tentatively be suggested."¹⁹¹

It is possible that some in Hebrews' audience believed in an exalted Melchizedek coming and exacting God's justice on the world. The author of Hebrews may be relying on such an idea to emphasize that it is not Melchizedek who is to judge the world, but rather the One whose work Melchizedek, at least partially, prefigured: Yeshua the Messiah. Furthermore, while we see explicit references to Melchizedek in the DSS, Lane points out that "it is recognized by nearly all interpreters that Melchizedek occupied an exalted status in the apocalyptic expectations of first-century sectarian Judaism."¹⁹² These sentiments need not have been believed only by the Qumran sect to be present in the greater sectors of Hebrews' audience.

2. Melchizedek was an important historical figure in Hellenistic Judaism:

The figure of Melchizedek has an important role to play in the Hellenistic Judaism of the Diaspora. Philo praises him, saying that he was "a lover of peace, and especially worthy of his priesthood. For he is called a just king, and a king is the opposite of a tyrant, because the one is the interpreter of law, and the other of

¹⁸⁹ Hegg, *Hebrews*, 119.

¹⁹⁰ Vermes, pp 501, 502.

¹⁹¹ Ellingworth, 353.

¹⁹² Lane, *Hebrews*, 47a:160-161.

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lawlessness" (*Allegorical Interpretation* 3.79).¹⁹³ He says that the Scriptures assign "to him the outward senses the faculty of feeling properly, and by the sense of speech the faculty of speaking well, and by the senses connected with the mind the faculty of thinking well" (*On the Preliminary Studies* 99).¹⁹⁴ He also talks about a tradition that indicates that Melchizedek honored Abraham and rejoiced in his victory freeing Lot: "he raised his hands to heaven, and honored him with prayers in his behalf, and offered up sacrifices of thanksgiving for his victory, and splendidly feasted all those who had had a share in the expedition; rejoicing and sympathizing with him as if the success had been his own" (*On Abraham* 235).¹⁹⁵

These concepts too were likely present among Hebrews' audience, as Melchizedek was viewed as a peaceful king who instated a law-abiding rule, was able to communicate well, and rejoiced when righteous persons such as Abraham would overcome evil. These are all characteristics that we can see present in the ministry of Yeshua, and His work for the redeemed.

In the eschatological sense, the most important aspect to know is that Yeshua, just like Melchizedek was, will be enthroned as king. The First Century historian Josephus actually says that Melchizedek was the first priest of Jerusalem, and that he also built a temple:

"But he who first built it was a powerful man among the Canaanites, and is in our own tongue called [Melchizedek], the Righteous King, for such he really was; on which account he was [there] the first priest of God, and first built a temple [there], and called the city of Jerusalem, which was formerly called Salem" (*Wars of the Jews* 11.438).¹⁹⁶

Paralleling this, Yeshua presently intercedes before God the Father in Heaven as high priest, and when He returns will reign over the world from Jerusalem over a fully-functioning restored Temple.

3. Rabbinic literature holds Melchizedek as being an exalted figure:

Rabbinical literature post-dating the composition of Hebrews holds him to be one of the four craftsmen of Zechariah 2:3: "And behold, the angel who was speaking with me was going out, and another angel was coming out to meet him." The Talmud states, "Who are these 'four craftsmen'? — R. Hana b. Bizna citing R. Simeon Hasida replied: The Messiah the son of David, the Messiah the son of Joseph, Elijah and the Righteous Priest" (b.*Sukkah* 52b).¹⁹⁷ The reference to "the Righteous Priest" would be viewed as being Melchizedek. Certain Rabbinical views of Melchizedek may have also been intertwined with the Archangel Michael, who is described as being "the great prince standing and offering" (b.*Zevachim* 62a)¹⁹⁸ in the Temple in Heaven. If some of these ideas were present among Hebrews' audience, the need to understand Yeshua as being pre-figured by Melchizedek, and superior to him, is self-apparent.

The concept of Melchizedek's priesthood would help Hebrews' audience to consider as valid, the ongoing ministry of Yeshua in Heaven. The author of Hebrews uses the silence about

¹⁹³ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 59.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 312.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 431.

¹⁹⁶ *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 750.

¹⁹⁷ *The Soncino Talmud. Judaic Classics Library II.*

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Melchizedek's birth, genealogy, and death to make the point that his priesthood continues on, concurrent with the fact, as Bruce notes, that "Historically, Melchizedek appears to have belonged to a dynasty of priest-kings in which he had both predecessors and successors."¹⁹⁹ The Talmud identifies Melchizedek as being a descendant of Shem or from "the priesthood from Shem" (b.*Nedarim* 32b).²⁰⁰ Melchizedek would historically have lived and died a normal human's life, but his work and priesthood continue on, now permanently present in the activities of Yeshua.

The author of Hebrews makes a correct statement by indicating that the Levites have a Torah-commanded responsibility to collect a tithe from among their fellow Israelites (Hebrews 7:5). The Levites had the responsibility of taking a part of the tithe of the Israelites, and then giving "one-tenth of the tithe as a gift to the LORD" (Numbers 18:26, NJPS). Yet as our writer states it, "this man [Melchizedek] who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises" (Hebrews 7:6, ESV). The point made is that Melchizedek had a legitimate priestly service, outside that of the Levitical priesthood established for Ancient Israel.

The author of Hebrews further observes, "beyond all dispute the lesser is always blessed by the greater" (Hebrews 7:7, NEB). While Abraham was greater in wealth and means than Melchizedek was, Melchizedek was greater in position than Abraham, as the one receiving a tithe is always of a higher position or office than the one giving it. So, as important as Abraham would surely and rightly have been for any within Hebrews' audience, Melchizedek would be, interestingly enough, a little more important.

The tithe "is collected by men who die" (Hebrews 7:8, NIV), but as our author observes, there is "one whom scripture affirms to be alive" (REB). The CJB/CJSB renders this as "in the case of Malki-Tzedek, it is received by someone who is testified to be still alive." Stern actually asserts in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary* that "Malki-Tzedek **is testified to still be alive**,"²⁰¹ yet this is an improper assumption based on our author's theological methods. *The Oxford Study Bible* (REB) likewise makes this mistake, indicating "The Levitical priests are mortal, Melchizedek is not."²⁰² Melchizedek can only be "still living" in the sense of how the priestly office that he occupied during the time of Abraham continues on in the present ministry of Yeshua. In view of what has just been stated about the lesser being blessed by the greater (Hebrews 7:7), our author's point is to significantly highlight the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood, even though it is easy to not think that much of it.

¹⁹⁹ Bruce, *Hebrews*, pp 159-160.

²⁰⁰ *The Soncino Talmud. Judaic Classics Library II.*

²⁰¹ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 680.

²⁰² Victor P. Furnish, "Hebrews," in M. Jack Suggs, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, and James R. Mueller, et. al., *The Oxford Study Bible*, REB (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1525.