

WHO IS MELCHIZEDEK IN THE BIBLE

Melchizedek should not be understood as God incarnate, nor as a theophany or Christophany of the sort. Biblical and historical evidence describes him as a real historic human figure who functioned simultaneously as a king and priest in the ancient Near Eastern world. The New Testament does not deny Melchizedek's humanity but only intended to emphasize that Scripture did not record neither his genealogy, his birth, nor his death. The literary feature of Melchizedek was simply used typologically, only as a literary model to explain the eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ.

Genesis 14 identifies Melchizedek as "king of Salem," a place widely recognized by Jewish (Hebrew Bible) and Christian (Old and New Testament) accounts as an early designation for Jerusalem, and as "priest of God Most High" (Gen 14:18). His appearance in the narrative occurs when he blesses Abram (Abraham) following a successful military victory over a coalition of four kings; including the recovery of Lot, Abram's family, all their belongings, and additional possessions taken in the conflict.

This dual role of priest and king set Melchizedek apart in the biblical story, as he represented a figure who is both a ruler and servant of the one true God. In this brief encounter, Melchizedek blessed Abram, declaring God's sovereignty over the victory and affirming Abraham's place within God's covenantal promises. In gratitude for this blessing and recognizing the authority of Melchizedek, Abram responded by giving him a tithe (a tenth) of the spoils captured from the four kings and their people. It was a recognition of God's blessings over Abraham and Melchizedek's superior priestly status rather than an establishment of the later Israelite tithe system incorporated into the Mosaic Law (Gen 14:19–20).

The tithe did not originate with the Law of Moses. It was a pagan practice that preceded Abraham and the nation of Israel by centuries. In keeping with an Arab war custom for that time, Abraham was obliged to pay a tithe or tenth of their spoils of war. The tithe or tenth share of captured goods or military spoils was typically offered as an act of religious devotion to the god believed to have provided victory. It was a practice sometimes performed

through the agency of a priest or priest-king acting as the local representative of the god in whom the victors placed their faith.

The tithe given by Abraham to Melchizedek, in this light, signaled his acknowledgment that it was God who had delivered him, and that Melchizedek, as priest of God, was the appropriate recipient. Abraham's tithe would thus be part of a larger Semitic tradition of tribute to a priest-king in the aftermath of a military victory, one that reflected not only religious devotion, but also political and cultic sensibilities. It was expected, and in Genesis it happened.

The re-interpretation of Abraham's act of piety by the author of Hebrews recasts it in a way that would have been meaningful to his original audience, as a figure and type of Christ's kingly and priestly office, like that of Melchizedek.[1] In the way that Melchizedek was superior to Abraham, the priesthood of Christ is greater than that of the Old Testament Levitical system.

Melchizedek's name is written in Hebrew as מֶלְכִּי־צֶדֶק (*Malkî-šedeq*) and is commonly understood to mean “My king is righteousness” or “King of righteousness,” deriving from *melek* (king) and *šedeq* (righteousness or justice), priest of El Elyon, the Most High God.[2] The Genesis account does not provide any genealogical data of his ancestry, birth, or death, a narrative silence that becomes the foundation for the typological argument developed in Psalm 110 and later in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

The absence of his recorded lineage does not imply immortality but functions literarily to portray Melchizedek as a priest whose office is not derived from hereditary succession. Hebrews interprets this silence typologically, stating that Melchizedek is “without father or mother or genealogy... resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever” (Heb 7:3). The resemblance lies not in ontology but in priestly pattern and function.

In biblical theology, the act of blessing flowed from the greater to the lesser, as the eldest son received the father's inheritance. The argument is intensified by the claim that the Levitical priests, who later received tithes

under the Mosaic Law, effectively paid tithes through Abraham, since Levi was still “in the loins” of his ancestor when Abraham encountered Melchizedek (Heb 7:9–10).

This reasoning establishes that the Levitical priesthood, though divinely instituted, is subordinate to the priesthood represented by Melchizedek. The Levitical priesthood, grounded in the Mosaic Law, was inherently limited. While it provided a temporal sacrificial system for Israel, it could not bring about ultimate perfection or complete access to God (Heb 7:11, 19). Because the priesthood was inseparably linked to the Law, a transformation of priesthood necessitated a transformation of law.

The emergence of a priest “after the order of Melchizedek” therefore signaled a fundamental redirection in God’s redemptive economy. This new priest arises not from the tribe of Levi but from Judah; a tribe to which the Law assigned no priestly function (Heb 7:13–14). Jesus’s priesthood is thus established not by genealogical qualification but by “the power of an indestructible life” (Heb 7:16) – He is eternal.

Psalm 110:4 inserted a decisive role in this theological development. In it, God swears an irrevocable oath, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” The epistle of Hebrews interpreted the oath as divinely binding and eschatologically significant, contrasting it with the Levitical priesthood, which was inaugurated without an oath. The divine oath underscored the permanence and superiority of Christ’s priesthood and established him as the guarantor of a better covenant (Heb 7:20–22). Whereas the Levitical priests were many in number and were continually replaced due to death, Jesus held/holds his priesthood permanently because he lives forever (Heb 7:23–24).

And because Jesus lives eternally, He is able to save completely those who draw near to God through Him, continually interceding on their behalf (Heb 7:25). His moral and spiritual qualifications far surpass those of the Levitical priests. He is described as holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens (Heb 7:26). Unlike the high priests under the Old Covenant, who were required to offer daily sacrifices first for their own

sins and then for the sins of the people, Christ offered a single definitive sacrifice of Himself to God (Heb 7:27). This act fulfilled and rendered obsolete the sacrificial system of the Mosaic Law.

Melchizedek is not at the center of biblical conversation. The author's sustained engagement on him is/was not an end in itself but a means of magnifying the supremacy of Christ. He was used to demonstrate how/that Jesus is greater than Abraham, Levi, and the entire Levitical system. The writer's intention with these narratives was intended to dissuade persecuted believers from abandoning the New Covenant established in Christ, in favor of the inferior Old Covenant established through Moses. To return to the former Levitical system of sacrifices would regress backwards from fulfillment to shadow, wherewith the former could not grant any hope of salvation.

In Israel's religious structure, the offices of king and priest were strictly separated, with kings arising from Judah and priests from Levi. In this context, Melchizedek stood as a rare biblical figure who held both offices simultaneously, foreshadowing a reality that finds its fulfillment in Christ. Jesus, as the Davidic king from the tribe of Judah, could not serve as a priest on earth according to the Mosaic Law. His priesthood is heavenly rather than earthly, and it is exercised in the true sanctuary where he continually intercedes for His people (Heb 8:1–2).

As both king and priest, Christ uniquely mediates between God and humanity, embodying the unity of authority and atonement that the Old Covenant could only anticipate and not provide. As such, Melchizedek only functioned typologically as a signpost pointing beyond himself to the greater reality of Christ. The ultimate purpose of invoking Melchizedek is/was to proclaim the finality, sufficiency, and superiority of Jesus's priesthood. He is the one mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5), the great high priest who has ascended up into heaven (Heb 4:14), and the eternal priest-king whose work fully accomplishes what God requires for people to be saved for all eternity.

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