

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### **Melchizedek: A Biblical and Historical Profile**

The biblical figure Melchizedek is shrouded in mystery. He’s mentioned only a couple of times in the Old Testament, and yet he plays a significant role in the New Testament Book of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews appeals to Melchizedek to develop important theological points about the priesthood of Messiah. Let’s dig into the biblical and historical material about this figure and see what we can learn.

Melchizedek first appears briefly in the book of Genesis. When King Chedorlaomer and his allies looted Sodom, they captured Abram’s nephew Lot. When Abram heard of this, he formed a small army to defeat them in battle and rescue his nephew. As he returns home, two kings come out to meet Abram—the king of Sodom and the mysterious king of Salem, Melchizedek:

#### **Genesis 14:17-20**

*After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!” And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.*

Melchizedek brings Abram bread and wine and blesses him. Abram responds by giving Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils he won in battle. Then, we don’t hear about Melchizedek again until he’s seemingly mentioned out of nowhere in Psalm 110.

Before we get to the next mention of Melchizedek, there’s already a lot here in Genesis to unpack.

### **The Meaning of the Name**

Let’s start with the name. There are two parts of the name Melchizedek: you have *malki* (my king) and *zedek* (righteousness).

The traditional interpretation of this name is “king of righteousness” (Hebrews 7:2). However, this is not

the only possible translation. Typically, to make the phrase “king of righteousness” in Hebrew, the words used would be *melech-zedek*, not *malki-zedek*. The *i* suffix on *malki*—the letter *yod* in Hebrew—adds the meaning “my” to the word to make it possessive, which would translate to “my king is righteous.” T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker explain:

Complicating the matter is a grammatical issue regarding the *i* suffix on the first element *malki*. The suffix may simply be the first singular possessive translated as “my king” or an archaic genitival element meaning “king of.”

-T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), p. 563

So, it could possibly go either way. Maybe Genesis 14:18 is using a form of Hebrew grammar that is no longer in use, and that the translation “king of righteousness” is correct.

However, when one uses more conventional Hebrew grammar, the *yod* at the end of a noun is a suffix that adds the meaning of “my” to the word. You normally don’t have this suffix in a construct phrase—that is, the connection of two nouns to make a “this noun of that noun” construct. So, based on conventional Hebrew grammar, it seems more consistent to translate *malki-zedek* as a name that means, “my king is righteous.”

So why then does the author of Hebrews interpret the name as “king of righteousness” if it’s more likely “my king is righteous” according to conventional Hebrew grammar? The most likely explanation is that the author of Hebrews, like other Jewish writers of his time, interpreted the name allegorically for theological purposes. As New Testament scholar Craig Keener writes:

The author of Hebrews may appeal here to ideas possibly known to his audience. **Greek-speaking Jews often allegorized names, including this one.**

-Craig Keener, *NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible: Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016)

The idea that “king of righteousness” in Hebrews is an allegorical interpretation, instead of a one-to-one translation, makes sense in light of the context. For instance, the author interprets Melchizedek’s title, *king of Salem*, to mean “king of peace,” which is his way of presenting Melchizedek as a symbol of peace. This exegetical tradition is also found in the first century writings of Josephus (*Ant.* 1.180) and Philo (*Leg.* 3.79), who likewise interpret Melchizedek’s name and title allegorically as “righteous king” and “king of peace.” Furthermore, the author’s mention of Melchizedek having no mother and father in the next verse is certainly an allegorical statement based on the silence of the text, as we’ll cover later.

Given that “king of righteousness” in Hebrews is likely an allegorical interpretation rather than a literal translation, there isn’t much holding us back from going with the conventional rules of Hebrew grammar and thus translating *malki* as “my king” instead of “king of.”

## Who was Melchizedek in Genesis?

Now, some might wonder why this difference matters. It’s either “king of righteousness” or “my king is righteous.” Who cares? Well, there are interesting implications if we take *malki* to be a possessive word meaning “my king.”

If *malki* does mean “my king,” it’s possible that this is a theophoric name. That means the name bears the name of a deity. For example, the name Malchiel (Genesis 46:17) means, “my king is El.” El, of course, is the singular of *elohim*, God. You also have Malchijah (Ezra 10:31), or *Malkiyyahu* in Hebrew, which contains the divine name, *Yah*. So the name means, “my king is Yah.”

If we continue with this train of thought that Melchizedek is a theophoric name, then zedek wouldn’t be an adjective meaning righteous but the name of a deity. What’s interesting is that, while zedek does mean “righteous,” there is also a well-known Canaanite deity named Zedek!

Before we get there, let’s look at a passage in Joshua. We have a parallel here that may give us a push in the direction that Melchizedek is actually a theophoric name:

### **Joshua 10:1, 3**

As soon as **Adoni-zedek**, king of Jerusalem, heard how Joshua had captured Ai and had devoted it to destruction [...] So **Adoni-zedek** king of Jerusalem sent to Hoham king of Hebron ...

Here we have this king of Jerusalem by the name of Adoni-zedek. *Adoni* in Hebrew is “my lord.” Again, you have the *i* (*yod*) suffix here, adding the meaning “my” to the word. So the name literally means “my lord is Zedek.”

Keep in mind that Jerusalem, in Joshua’s day, was a Canaanite territory. Jerusalem didn’t become the capital city of Israel until King David’s time (2 Samuel 5:6-9). So, here we have a Canaanite king named Adoni-zedek, “my lord is Zedek.” He is the king of Jerusalem, which is widely considered to be the same region as Salem in the time of Abram (see Psalm 76:2). Jerusalem in Joshua’s day was a Canaanite territory, and it’s reasonable to think that Salem likewise was under Canaanite control during Abram’s time. And also, Zedek is a Canaanite deity!

Here is what the scholar Bernard Batto says regarding the god Zedek:

The West Semitic deity Zedek, ‘Righteousness’, is found in the Bible only in the personal names Melchizedek (Gen 14:18; cf. Ps 110:4; Heb 5:6; 6:20-7:17) and Adonizedek (Josh 10:1.3), both Canaanite kings of pre-Israelite Jerusalem. Zedek is probably to be identified with the deity known as Isar among the Amorites and Kittu in Babylonia, and thus a hypostasis or personification of the sun god Shamash’s function as divine overseer of justice. The cult of Zedek appears to have been well established in pre-Israelite (Jebusite) Jerusalem.

-Bernard F. Batto, “Zedek.” *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. Karel Van Der Toorn, Bob Becking, & Pieter W. Van Der Horst, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1999), p. 929-930

Melchizedek also blesses Abram in the name of “God Most High,” *el elyon*. Since El is the name of the chief Canaanite deity in Ugaritic and Phoenician literature, many scholars say that Melchizedek was referring to a Canaanite god. This would make sense in light of what we already covered.

However, immediately after this encounter with Melchizedek, when interacting with the king of Sodom, Abram identifies *YHWH* as *el elyon*. For Abram, *YHWH*, not any pagan god, is the true God Most High (Genesis 14:23). This became an important exegetical point that later biblical and extra-biblical writers used to incorporate Melchizedek theologically into the priesthood of Abram’s God, *YHWH*.

Now, even as a Canaanite king, it's possible that Melchizedek became a worshiper of YHWH sometime before this encounter with Abram. That would mean he worshiped *YHWH* as God Most High. Since the text doesn't say, that would only be an assumption, but it's an assumption that was widely held by later Jewish writers. Perhaps YHWH revealed himself to Melchizedek in the same way he revealed himself to Abram. It's not impossible for that to have been the case. After all, the people in Abram's family and community were polytheists, and yet Abram became a follower of YHWH. Why couldn't something similar have happened with Melchizedek? You also have other figures that aren't part of Abraham's line or the people of Israel proper, and yet they still recognized YHWH as the true God. Consider Jethro. He was a priest of Midian (Exodus 18:1), but he recognized and blessed YHWH (Exodus 18:10).

Whatever the case may be, later biblical and extra-biblical writers adopted Melchizedek into their own theological framework, and he became an important figure. But based solely on the information provided in Genesis, Melchizedek, as a historical person, appears to have been a Canaanite king.

In summary, it's very possible that Melchizedek, *Malki-zedek*, means, "my king is Zedek," as in the Canaanite deity Zedek. This is based on several points:

1. The *i* (*yod*) suffix on *malki* means that the word most likely translates to "my king."
2. *Malki* is used in theophoric names like Malchiel, meaning, "my king is El," and Malchijah, meaning, "my king is Yah."
3. Zedek is a Canaanite deity.
4. There is a parallel name in Joshua: Adoni-zedek, which means, "my lord is Zedek."
5. Adoni-zedek was the king of Jerusalem, which was a Canaanite territory at that time.
6. Jerusalem and Salem are widely considered to be the same region. In Psalm 76:2, for example, Salem is used in synonymous parallelism to Zion, identifying Salem as Jerusalem.
7. Since Adoni-zedek means "my lord is Zedek," and he was king of Jerusalem, it makes complete sense to take this back a few hundred years earlier to Genesis 14 and read the name Melchizedek as meaning "my king is Zedek." Both of these men were kings of the same Canaanite territory at different times.

Based on this information, one could reasonably conclude that the historical Melchizedek in Genesis was an ancient Canaanite king. But this doesn't preclude the possibility that he had become a follower of YHWH sometime before his encounter with Abram.

This is a widely held theory among scholars regarding the historical Melchizedek, and it makes sense within the context of Genesis 14. But there are a couple other popular theories worth discussing.

In Judaism, the historical Melchizedek of Genesis is traditionally believed to have been Noah's son, Shem. Since this theory appears in later rabbinic literature (Targums on Genesis 14:18-20; Mid. Rab. *Gen* 46.7; b.*Nedarim* 32b, etc.), it's quite possible that the reason for identifying Shem with Melchizedek was to counter Christianity. According to the scholar Philip E. Hughes:

The theory that Melchizedek and Noah's eldest son Shem were one and the same person was introduced by rabbinical scholars before the end of the first century with the purpose, it would seem, of counteracting the superior importance assigned by Christians to Melchizedek as a type of Christ on the basis of the doctrine of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

-Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 244

What is the exegetical rationale for the theory that the historical Melchizedek was Shem? Well, it seems to be based solely on the fact that, according to the chronologies listed in Genesis 11, Shem was still alive for a little over 200 years after Abram's birth. That's the only connection—that they were alive at the same time. That's it!

Interestingly enough, the rabbinic literature is full of these leaps in logic. We could compare this interpretation of Melchizedek as Shem with the popular rabbinic belief that Abraham's wife Keturah, whom he married after Sarah's death, was actually the same person as Hagar! This theory is based on a creative interpretation of Genesis 25:1, which says Abraham "took another wife." This verse could also be translated literally as "then again Abraham took a wife." It's inferred from this that Keturah was Hagar, who was married to Abraham before, and "then again" taken to be his wife. So, you can see the leap in logic there.

We shouldn't be surprised to see a similar non sequitur in rabbinic literature as it concerns Melchizedek. That's just the nature of a lot of the rabbinic literature. But there doesn't seem to be any kind of biblical basis for identifying the historical Melchizedek with Shem. The fact that their lives overlapped chronologically does nothing to prove that they're the same person.

Another theory in Christianity, though it's not that popular, is that Melchizedek was a theophany—that is, an appearance of the pre-incarnate Messiah Yeshua. But this theory is unlikely. For one, there's nothing in the text of Genesis 14 that indicates Melchizedek was anything more than a regular human. In other theophanies, the person encountering God always seems to be somewhat aware that they are in the presence of the divine, but there's nothing in Genesis 14 that suggests Abram thought he was encountering God in his interactions with Melchizedek. Finally, the theophany view is based largely on how Melchizedek is described in Hebrews, but the author of Hebrews himself distinguishes Yeshua from Melchizedek. The author says that Melchizedek resembles Yeshua, not that they are the same person.

Now, while it doesn't make sense for Melchizedek to be the pre-incarnate Messiah Yeshua, the biblical data is still compatible with the idea of Melchizedek being a *type* of Messiah—that is, a prophetic foreshadow. This doesn't mean, of course, that there needs to be a one-to-one match between the Melchizedek of Genesis and Yeshua at every point. We'll unpack this more a little bit later.

For now, let's move on to see how this Melchizedek profile develops after Genesis 14.

## **The development of the Melchizedek tradition.**

While Melchizedek was a historical person in Abram's life, when we look beyond the scope of Genesis 14, we discover that there is more going on with this figure. In the Bible, Melchizedek is adapted into a theological type or symbol. Regardless of who Melchizedek was in history, the Melchizedek figure came to be associated with several important theological themes:

- While it's true that Zedek was the name of a Canaanite deity, the word *zedek* means "righteousness." Thus, Melchizedek came to be associated with the theme of righteousness.
- He was king of Salem, and thus he became associated with themes of kingship and Jerusalem.
- Since Jerusalem means "city of peace," he became associated with themes of peace (e.g. Hebrews 7:2).
- He was a priest, and thus became associated with the theme of priesthood.

Later biblical and extra-biblical authors built upon this Melchizedek profile and eventually began to speak of the Messiah in connection with these themes.

Let's look at the second mention of Melchizedek in the Old Testament, which is found in Psalm 110:

### Psalm 110

The Lord [YHWH] says to my Lord [*adoni*]: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” The Lord [YHWH] sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies! Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments; from the womb of the morning, the dew of your youth will be yours. The Lord [YHWH] has sworn and will not change his mind, **“You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.”** The Lord [YHWH] is at your right hand; he will shatter kings on the day of his wrath. He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses; he will shatter chiefs over the wide earth. He will drink from the brook by the way; therefore he will lift up his head.

Scholars refer to Psalm 110 as a “royal psalm.” It's a psalm proclaiming the enthronement of a king. The Psalm's superscription reads, “a psalm of David.” And David, of course, is the king of Israel whose name is associated with the lineage of Israelite kings in addition to the expected Messianic king.

Verse 1 reads, “YHWH says to my Lord.” The recipient of this prophetic oracle from YHWH is a king whom David calls *adoni*, “my Lord.” Verse 4 then associates this king with the priestly order of Melchizedek. Just like the last mention of Melchizedek in Genesis 14, we have this concept of a priest-king in Psalm 110.

As an interesting side note, Psalm 110 is quoted some fourteen times in the New Testament, which is more than any other psalm (Matthew 22:44; Mark 14:62; 16:19; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:34-35; 7:55-56; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 1 Peter 3:22). The New Testament authors taught that this psalm was embodied in the person and ministry of Yeshua—the ultimate priest-king.

To summarize what we learn from the Psalm:

- An eternal priestly office that is somehow related to or like the priesthood of Melchizedek is bestowed upon the Davidic king addressed in the psalm.
- This Davidic priest-king of Psalm 110 will have a scepter, a symbol of reigning power.
- He will rule and execute judgment among the nations
- He will sit at YHWH's right hand, which is a symbolic position of honor and distinction.
- His rule will extend from Zion into the midst of the enemy's territory.

In light of Psalm 110, we can add the themes of ideal Davidic kingship and eschatological justice to the Melchizedek profile. So as early as Psalm 110, Melchizedek is seen as a theological symbol. He offers a biblical model for the combination of priestly and royal offices, which is applied to the king addressed in the psalm.

When we get to the extra-biblical Jewish literature from the Second Temple era, there are even more beliefs and ideas added to this Melchizedek figure. Many of these concepts are derived from the biblical texts using, you could say, *speculative* exegesis.

For example, while Josephus recognized that Melchizedek was a Canaanite, he understood him to be the first priest before YHWH. He also understood that Melchizedek built the first temple in Jerusalem (*Wars of the Jews*, Vol. 6). Since Melchizedek was a priest of “God Most High,” it made sense in Josephus’ mind that he would have a temple to serve at, even though the text says nothing about this. As scholar Eric Mason writes:

Josephus says that Melchizedek built the first temple in the city. This is striking because Josephus implies that it was Melchizedek’s temple that was destroyed by the Babylonians. In *J.W.* 6.437, Josephus dates this destruction 1468 years, six months after the foundation of the temple. This clearly associates the foundation of the temple with Melchizedek rather than Solomon, who is not mentioned in the context [...] Presumably Josephus was not bothered that a Canaanite is credited with the establishment of Israel’s temple. Instead, he seems more interested in appealing to the antiquarian tastes of his Roman leadership.

-Eric F. Mason, *You Are a Priest Forever: Second Temple Jewish Messianism and the Priestly Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Brill Publishing, 2008), p. 155

Philo of Alexandria also had some interesting ideas about Melchizedek. He considered Melchizedek the eternal *Logos*, or “Word” of God (*Alleg. Interp.* 3.79-82), the same terminology used of Yeshua in John 1.

The Jewish community at Qumran comes up with even more interesting ideas! Among the Dead Sea Scrolls is a document called 11QMelchizedek, or 11Q13, which is dated to around 100 BC. Tim Hegg gives an excellent summary of this document:

In this remarkable text, a number of things stand out. First, Melchizedek is clearly connected to the final restoration and redemption of Israel, both in a physical as well as spiritual way. He proclaims “Jubilee to the captives,” understood as a release from the debt of their sins. He is able to do this because, viewing this eschatological day of redemption under the rubric of Yom Kippur, “he will atone for all the Sons of Light and the people who are predestined to him.” The “favorable year of Adonai” found in Is 61:2 is interpreted here as “the year of Melchizedek’s favor.” Secondly, Melchizedek will establish a “righteous kingdom” because he will act as the righteous judge. Ps 82:1 is then offered as proof, interpreted to be speaking of Melchizedek: “it is written about him in the Songs of David, ‘Elohim has taken his place in the congregation of El’” Here the meaning seems inescapable, that Melchizedek is referred to as Elohim. Then Ps 7:7–8 is added as additional corroboration: “Over it (i.e., the congregation of El) take your seat in the highest heaven; El will judge the peoples.” Thus, in 11Q13, Melchizedek is the divine judge who sits in the highest heavens, and who executes divine justice upon the righteous and the unrighteous. In so doing, he saves the righteous and condemns the wicked (Belial and those with him), bringing in the “Day of Salvation” prophesied by Isaiah.

-Tim Hegg, *Hebrews* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2016), Vol. 1, p. 256

So, this document portrays Melchizedek as a heavenly being who launches an eschatological jubilee that releases people from their sins. Melchizedek is a heavenly savior figure that reigns during the Messianic era and carries out judgment upon the wicked. While he is never called “Messiah,” he is portrayed as a heavenly high priest who makes atonement for the “Sons of Light” on Yom Kippur. Shockingly, when the author quotes Isaiah 61:2, he even goes so far as to substitute YHWH for Melchizedek!

As we can see, some Second Temple Jewish writers went overboard with how they viewed this figure. There is no indication from the Old Testament that Melchizedek was any kind of divine being. But this type of thing actually isn't surprising to see in Second Temple Jewish literature. Melchizedek isn't the only figure that some Jewish writers in the Second Temple era made these kinds of claims about. For instance, the Book of Enoch portrays the patriarch Enoch as the eschatological judge and savior who sits on YHWH's throne and reigns at the end of the age.

For more on that, see our teachings [Testing the Book of Enoch](#) and [The Son of Man in the Book of Enoch](#).

There was a lot of speculation and anticipation among various groups in this time period regarding the Messianic figure prophesied to come. Since Melchizedek is mentioned in important Messianic texts, like Psalm 110, it's easy to see how he would become part of the discussion.

## Melchizedek in the Book of Hebrews

Like other Jewish writers of his time, the author of Hebrews utilizes Melchizedek as a theological symbol beyond who he was historically, but he does so in a different way. He uses Melchizedek as a literary type to exalt Yeshua the Messiah.

Throughout the book, the author of Hebrews compares Yeshua to key people to show how Yeshua is greater. The author's goal is to encourage his readers to stay faithful to Messiah, and he does this by arguing that Messiah is the greatest revelation from God. He is greater than the angels (1-2). He is greater than Moses and the Promised Land (3-4). He is greater than the Levitical Priesthood (5-8). He is greater than all the sacrifices (9-10). So the author is making an argument from the lesser to the greater: if we are called to heed God's previous revelation through Moses, the priesthood, and so forth, *how much more* ought we to be faithful to God's greatest revelation of himself in Yeshua the Messiah? Also, on the flipside, it was very bad when Israel refused to heed God's previous revelation; how much worse it is to refuse to stay faithful to the Messiah! Here's an example of the author employing this line of reasoning:

### Hebrews 10:28-29

Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?

So, how does Melchizedek fit into this argument? Well first, remember that the author uses Melchizedek as a theological symbol or metaphor, not a historical person. Here's how the scholar Dr. Walter Brueggemann puts it:

**It is futile to seek a connection between Melchizedek and Jesus in any historical way** (cf. Heb. 7:16). The connection is based on other kinds of parallels which are **theological and not historical**. The text does not claim that Jesus is derived or descended from Melchizedek but rather is "like" him (7:15) or belongs "to the order of..." (Heb. 6:20; 7:11). The linkage concerns the similarity of *function* rather than any identity of person. **Any attempt to penetrate behind the typology into history is illegitimate**. But the claim made for the function should not be overlooked. The writer of Hebrews seeks to ground the authority of the gospel in something beyond history. The inscrutable appearance of Melchizedek provides a way for such a trans-

historical claim. **The text of Hebrews is not interested in Melchizedek except as a metaphor and a way of speaking.**

-Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 139

Having established that, there are three main points that the author is making with which Melchizedek is related:

- 1) Even though he is not a son of Aaron, Yeshua is still a legitimate priest according to Scripture. This can be established on the basis of Melchizedek, who functioned as a legitimate priest in Scripture even though he was not a son of Aaron.
- 2) Yeshua qualifies for this priesthood, “not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life” (Hebrews 7:16).
- 3) Yeshua’s priesthood is greater than the Levitical priesthood.

At the very end of chapter 6, the author declares that Yeshua has “become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 6:20). So the author sees Yeshua as the Davidic priest-king who fulfills the prophecies of Psalm 110. Then, chapter 7 is where we encounter the bulk of information related to Melchizedek. The author goes back to the Genesis reference and interprets it in light of Psalm 110. Let’s look at some passages:

### **Hebrews 7:1-3**

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.

The first thing to point out is that the author of Hebrews uses midrashic methods of interpretation throughout his epistle, which can often be confusing to modern readers. For example, the author argues from silence to support his conclusions. That is to say, if the Scriptures don’t specifically say something about a person or event, then certain determinations could be made based on the silence of Scripture.

As scholar F.F. Bruce explains:

Historically Melchizedek appears to have belonged to a dynasty of priest-kings in which he had both predecessors and successors. If this point had been put to our author, he would have agreed at once, no doubt; but this consideration was foreign to his purpose. The important consideration was the account given of Melchizedek in holy writ; to him the silences of Scripture were as much due to divine inspiration as were to its statements.

-F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), p. 160

When the author speaks of Melchizedek being “without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life,” he is arguing from silence. Since the biblical text never records anything about Melchizedek’s death, it can be said that Melchizedek “continues a priest forever.” The author’s point about Melchizedek having no recorded genealogy also demonstrates that one could be a legitimate priest even if they have no connection to Aaron or the tribe of Levi.

So, if someone objects and says, “Yeshua can’t be a priest because he’s not from the tribe of Levi!” this analogy to Melchizedek addresses that objection. Now, the author would actually agree with the objection in one sense: since he’s not from the tribe of Levi, Yeshua can’t be a priest *on earth*. There are already priests who serve in the earthly tabernacle (Hebrews 8:4). But the author is not talking about the earthly priesthood. There’s another priesthood mentioned in the Scriptures, which doesn’t depend on tribal lineage. In Melchizedek, the author finds a “higher” priesthood—one that transcends the earthly realm and continues forever.

To be clear, the reality of Yeshua’s heavenly priesthood does not replace the Levitical priesthood. Again, the author of Hebrews affirms the ongoing service of the Levitical priesthood on earth. For more on this, see our teachings, [Hebrews 7:12 - A Change in the Law](#) and [Animal Sacrifices in Light of Messiah](#).

The point about Melchizedek “resembling the Son of God” is to say that Melchizedek is a type or foreshadow of Yeshua. Again, just as Melchizedek’s priesthood doesn’t depend on tribal lineage, neither does Yeshua’s. Melchizedek’s priesthood, in the author’s mind, was begun by God and continues forever by virtue of the silence in Scripture. Likewise, Messiah’s priesthood is established by God himself and continues forever.

Now the author goes on to speak about how the Melchizedek priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood:

#### **Hebrews 7:4-10**

See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. In the one case tithes are received by mortal men, but in the other case, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

So, not only does Melchizedek’s priesthood not depend on the tribe of Levi, but also it preexisted the tribe of Levi. It’s greater than the Levitical priesthood since Abraham, from whom Levi is descended, gave tithes to him and was blessed by him. It can even be argued, according to the author, that *Levi himself* tithed to Melchizedek by proxy through Abraham, since Levi came from Abraham.

As Tim Hegg writes:

The obvious conclusion of such an argument is that the priesthood which derives from Melchizedek must be superior to that which derives from Abraham, since Melchizedek is seen to have a superior rank when compared to Abraham.

-Tim Hegg, *Hebrews* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2016), Vol. 1, p. 268

With all that said, since this different priesthood does not depend on tribal lineage like the earthly priesthood, how does one qualify for it? The author tells us:

#### **Hebrews 7:13-17**

For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, **who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life.** For it is witnessed of him, “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”

Yeshua qualifies as the heavenly high priest on the basis of his resurrection from the dead! Yeshua’s work on the cross made atonement for sin, reconciling men with God, which is the function of a priest. All authority in heaven and on earth was given to Messiah, and he ascended to the right hand of YHWH (Matthew 28:16-20). This was foretold beforehand, in Psalm 110. Yeshua’s priesthood was confirmed with a covenant oath (Hebrews 7:20-21). In Psalm 110, YHWH promises David’s “Lord” that he would be a priest forever. Melchizedek’s priesthood is once again used as the template for Yeshua’s priesthood—it’s not based on tribal lineage and it continues forever.

The author’s use of Melchizedek was to demonstrate how Yeshua the Messiah is the ultimate priest-king. He’s the promised Savior and heavenly high priest, spoken of in Psalm 110. While other Jewish communities exalted Melchizedek as some sort of divine redeemer figure, the author of Hebrews uses Melchizedek as a type to exalt Yeshua.

In conclusion, Melchizedek was a historical person in Abram’s life. While there is not enough information to be definitive, it seems likely that he was a Canaanite king. Nevertheless, Melchizedek was eventually adapted into a theological symbol connected to themes of righteousness, ideal kingship and priesthood, Jerusalem, peace, and eschatological justice. Due to his association with these themes, Melchizedek became part of the overall Jewish discussion and expectations regarding the Messiah. Some Jewish communities, like the Qumran community, were misguided in how they viewed Melchizedek as a divine, Messianic figure. The author of Hebrews, in contrast to those ideas, uses Melchizedek as a metaphor to establish the legitimacy and superiority of Messiah’s priesthood, exalting Yeshua as the ultimate priest-king.

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.*

*Remember, continue to test everything.*

*Shalom!*

*For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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