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Q&A#10 The Significance of Melchizedek

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Today's Question: Why is Melchizedek so important to the author of Hebrews? What's the biblical-theological significance of Jesus being a priest after the order of Melchizedek?

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is about the character of Melchizedek. Why is Melchizedek so important to the author of Hebrews? What's the biblical-theological significance of Jesus being a priest after the order of Melchizedek? So the passage in Hebrews being referred to, we first encounter Melchizedek in chapter 5 of Hebrews.

So also Christ did not glorify himself to become high priest, but it was he who said to him, You are my son, today I have begotten you. As he also says in another place, You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek, who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with vehement cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death, and was heard because of his godly fear, though he was a son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered. And having been perfected, he became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him, called by God as high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, of whom we have much to say and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

Later on we see in chapter 6, verse 13, For when God made a promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no one greater, he swore by himself, saying, Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you. After he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute.

Therefore God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in

which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge, to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the present behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become high priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek. For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the most high God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings, and blessed him, to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, meaning 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, remains a priest continually.

Now consider how great this man was, to whom even the patriarch Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils. And indeed those who are of the sons of Levi, who receive the priesthood, have a commandment to receive tithes from the people according to the law, that is from their brethren, though they have come from the loins of Abraham. But he whose genealogy is not derived from them, received tithes from Abraham, and blessed him, who had the promises.

Now beyond all contradiction, the lesser is blessed by the better. Here mortal men receive tithes, but there he receives them, of whom it is witnessed that he lives. Even Levi, who receives tithes, pays tithes through Abraham, so to speak.

But he was still in the loins of his father, when Melchizedek met him. Then it goes on to talk about how Christ is a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Even though he's not of the Levitical line, but is from the tribe of Judah, he is the bringing in, he brings in a better hope, and a better priesthood, an unchangeable priesthood.

And inasmuch as he was not made priest without an oath, for they have become priests without an oath, but he with an oath, by him who said to him, the Lord has sworn and will not relent, you are a order of Melchizedek, by so much more has Jesus become a surety of a better covenant. And there were many priests, because they were prevented from death, by death from continuing, but he, because he continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore he is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him, since he ever lives to make intercession for them.

For such a high priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens, who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for his own sins, and then for the people's. For this he did once for all, when he offered up himself. For the Lord appoints high priests, men who have weakness, but the word of the oath which came after the law, appoints the son, who has become, been perfected forever.

Now this is the main point of the things we are saying, we have such a high priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in the heavens, a minister of the

sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man. So that's the reference to Melchizedek in Hebrews. He alludes within there to Psalm 110, which reads, the Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool.

The Lord shall send the rod of your strength out of Zion, rule in the midst of your enemies. Your people shall be volunteers in the day of your power. In the beauties of holiness, from the womb of the morning, you have the dew of your youth.

The Lord has sworn and will not relent. You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek. The Lord is at your right hand.

He shall execute kings in the day of his wrath. He shall judge among the nations. He shall fill the places with dead bodies.

He shall execute the heads of many countries. He shall drink of the brook by the wayside. Therefore he shall lift up the head.

And then in Genesis chapter 14, we find the first reference to Melchizedek. It's in the context of the battle against the kings, that the kings that battle and the capture of Lot and deliverance of Lot by Abraham and his men. After the victory against the kings, we read in verse 18, then Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine.

He was the priest of God most high, and he blessed him and said, blessed be Abraham of God most high, possessor of heaven and earth, and blessed be God most high, who has delivered your enemies into your hand. And he gave him a tithe of all. Now the king of Sodom said to Abraham, give me the persons and take the goods for yourself.

But Abraham said to the king of Sodom, I have lifted my hand to the Lord God most high, the possessor of heaven and earth, that I will take nothing from a thread to a sandal strap, and I will not take anything that is yours, lest you should say I have made Abraham rich, except only what the young men have eaten and the portion of the men who went with me, Anna, Eshcol, and Mamre. Let them take their portion. So this is a lengthy introduction to the character of Melchizedek.

The character of Melchizedek occurs at a, first appears and only appears at this very significant juncture of history. So if you read from chapters 12 to 14 of Genesis, it's as if Abraham plays out the history of Israel in advance. There's a famine in the land, he descends into the land of Egypt where Sarai is taken by Pharaoh, where Pharaoh is then plagued on account of taking Sarai.

Sarai is delivered, they're given many gifts, they leave the land and go into the land of Canaan. As they go to the land of Canaan, they wander, Abraham wanders throughout the land and marks out the territory, divides from Lot. And then later on, we have the capture of Lot by the of the, in the battle of the kings.

And then the deliverance, defeat of the kings and the deliverance of Lot from their hands. And then that's where Melchizedek appears. Melchizedek is a character who is significant in his connections.

He's the king of Salem, a place that most would identify with Jerusalem. He is the priest and a king, the priest of God most high. He's someone who does a significant thing.

He blesses Abraham and he also receives a tithe from Abraham. So all of these details are significant. But significant that he appears when he does.

He appears at the climax of this playing out of the history of Israel, playing out of the pattern of the Exodus, going into Egypt as a result of a famine, being delivered from Egypt with many gifts, going into the land of Canaan, marking out that territory and having this victory over the kings and being settled within the land. He appears at that point. He appears at the climax, at the completion of that.

And then he blesses Abraham. Abraham's gone through this whole cycle, living out the history of his descendants in advance. And then he's blessed by this character and he gives him a tithe.

This is a mysterious thing to happen. It would seem as the author of Hebrews argues that the lesser is blessed by the greater. But here we see Abraham blessed by this character we've never seen before, by Melchizedek, this king of Salem, this king of the site that will become the centre of Israel's life, the site of its king, the city of David.

And he's a figure who has entered into kingship himself. He is a king and he's a priest. His priesthood is associated with the ministrations of this victory celebration.

So he brings out bread and wine. He blesses Abraham and he receives a tithe from him. Now, Abraham, as the author of Hebrews argues, is the ancestor of Levi, the tribe of Levi, and their priesthood derives from him.

But yet he is the one who is blessed by Melchizedek and he is also the one that pays a tithe to Melchizedek rather than vice versa. So all of this seems to invite reflection and contemplation. What is it about this character that accounts for his appearance at this critical juncture? Why, after playing out this history of Israel in advance, would we find that Abraham meets with a character at the climax who seems to be greater than him, a character who he defers to in a number of significant ways? That is a striking question that the text itself invites.

So the author of Hebrews is not just taking this random character from history and thinking of this character and using this character as a means to make his argument but forcing this character into a particular Christological framework. No, this character had already invited reflection within the text of Genesis itself. You see this character and you think there's something unusual about this guy.

There's something about this guy that invites analysis. What is it about him? And it's not something that is novel in the author of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews was not the first person to reflect upon this character.

As we saw in Psalm 110, this character of Melchizedek had already been brought forward as a paradigm of a priest-king. A priest-king that was the framework, provided a framework for understanding a sort of Davidic reign, the reign which was ultimately related to the Messiah. That same passage is referred to in Jesus' teaching when he argues how can David say of his son, refer to his son as my lord.

Again it would seem that the lesser would speak in that way of the greater but how can David be the lesser? These examples are very similar to each other. In this particular character we have a figure who represents something that exceeds both Abraham and David in particular ways. He's associated with victory in Genesis chapter 14, the victory over the kings and the celebration of that, the victory feast, the one bringing out the bread and wine and blessing and receiving the tithe of the spoils.

In Psalm 110 he's the one who's victorious over the kings, the one through whom God reigns, the one who overcomes all the nations, the one who is placed at God's right hand until the enemies are made his footstool. In Hebrews we have the same thing. The priesthood is associated with sitting at God's right hand, not so much in the period of suffering beforehand but in the period of victory, of entering into that status of kingship, of sitting at God's right hand and ruling over all his enemies.

So this significant character invites reflection. The book of Hebrews is again a text that is related to other texts that existed around that time and before. So we have reflection upon the character of Melchizedek in a number of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

He was a character that was recognized to be an important one, a character who stuck out, a character who was this peculiar presence within the text that left people asking significant questions. So we've gone through this pattern of Israel's history, we've arrived at the climax and Abraham has played out this pattern typologically in advance and then this figure appears on the screen, on the scene, this figure of Melchizedek, this figure who seems to exceed Abraham. Now is this figure the pre-incarnate Christ? Some have suggested as much.

Some have suggested maybe he's Michael, associated with this angelic ruler, which again some have also associated with Christ with good reason. That is an arguable position but I don't think that's what's referred to here. I think the significance of Melchizedek is seen in what he represents typologically.

Not so much in the historical figure taken in himself as a just an individual within history but in the role that he plays that points towards something greater than him. Christ is the one who comes at the same place in history, at the same juncture as it were. So we

have the same pattern being played out in Israel's history and then Christ is the Melchizedek, the greater Melchizedek who comes, the one who meets the sons of Abraham and blesses them, the one to whom they give their offerings.

Also Christ is the one who is the greater king than David. He's David's greater son. He's the priest according to the order of Melchizedek but he's also the lord that David calls lord.

And so in both of these cases we see a confirmation of but also a culmination and an eclipse in certain respects of a previous covenant order. So Abraham is exceeded by this greater figure that comes at the end of history in this eschatological moment. Likewise David is exceeded by this greater one, this king of Salem, this one who brings bread and wine, this one who gives a kingdom, this one who receives gifts and offerings.

And so Christ is that one according to the author of Hebrews. He sees in this figure, this figure of Melchizedek, something that gestures towards this character of Christ. Christ who has come at the climax of history, who has sat down at the right hand of the throne on high, the one to whose enemies have been placed beneath his feet, the one who ministers for us before God's throne, the one who has entered into his kingdom even while we're still awaiting our entrance into the kingdom.

And so Christ is the one who is like Melchizedek. That significance as with many of these other characters in scripture is not an arbitrary one that is imposed upon the text but is one that is found by anyone who's attentive to the text within Genesis. This text invites reflection and the author of Hebrews wants us to go back and look at that text.

What might we see when we look at that text more closely? And what we see is Israel's history being played out, Israel's story being played out in advance and then Abraham meeting someone who is a greater figure than he is and who represents something that exceeds him. Now, this is an individual character in history but we don't see any reference to his entrance into a particular priestly office. There is no Melchizedekan priesthood that starts at the age of 30 and ends at the age of 50, for instance.

We're not told his genealogy. There's no end of his days that's given. Rather, he stands as this figure detached from all these genealogies, all these rituals and all these offices that would determine a particular circumscribed place that he would have.

Rather, he comes into history as this figure who has no origin given to us, no story behind him. And he comes at this significant moment where he's obviously standing for something greater than himself, standing for something that represents the glorious climax of Israel's history. And yet, we don't know who this person is.

We anticipate this person in the Old Testament. We anticipate who is this person that will come at, what is this reality that Melchizedek represents that will come at the climax of

Israel's history, that will eclipse even Abraham, that will eclipse even David. And Hebrews suggests that this person is Christ.

And so the significance of the character of Melchizedek is one that is rooted in Old Testament witness, that is explored in Old Testament reflection and intertestamental literature, and then it's revealed in the person of Christ. And in the book of Hebrews, what we see is mysteries from the Old Testament disclosed as this room that has been darkened, where we've groped and tried to discern the shape of the furniture within it, where the door is flung open, the light streams in. And we see this character of Melchizedek, this figure who comes after the victory over the enemies, this great character who represents the king and his ministration of victory and his celebration in sacrifice.

At this moment, in this character of Melchizedek, we see an anticipation of Jesus Christ. And so when we read the book of Hebrews, this person is made known to us. This person who has been a mystery in the pages of the Old Testament, a source of reflection and speculation, has now been disclosed and made known to us.

If you have any further questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account. I'll leave the link for that below. And I hope to come back in the next couple of days and answer further questions.