

MELCHIZEDEK: WHO WAS HE?

The identity of Melchizedek has been debated for millennia. His ancestry appears to be of cryptic origin. Bible enthusiasts have been digging for clues since before the time of Jesus. However, the answers concerning this man are right before our eyes. One thing that has led to all the speculation over his identity is that so much of the research in this area has left the context of the verses that mention him.

If you recall, we read of Melchizedek last week when he came in contact with Abram upon his return from the sack of the Eastern kings that took Lot and all the other spoils from their military campaign through Canaan and what is known today as the Jordan Valley.

Gen. 14:18 – 20

18 Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. 19 And he blessed him and said:

*“Blessed be Abram of God Most High,
Possessor of heaven and earth;*

*20 And blessed be God Most High,
Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.” And he gave him a tithe of all.*

Melchizedek was king AND priest of the ancient city of Salem, which would eventually come to be known as Jerusalem. The fact that he was king AND priest is the first clue to the mystery we find in front of us. No one else in the Bible, as far as the lineage from Adam to Jesus is concerned held both offices. There were kings in Israel and there was the Aaronic priesthood that was eventually

established at Sinai, but the two offices were never combined. David was a king but not a priest. Aaron was a priest but not a king. Melchizedek however held both offices. This sets the context for what we read about him in the Psalms and the book of Hebrews.

Chronologically we are around 1912 BC. We are about 436 years after the flood. The dispersion from Babel took place roughly 300 years earlier. Melchizedek was a title, not a proper name. The priest/ king of Salem went out to greet Abram, and received tithes of him. We are told that this man was a priest of the Most High God. Abram didn't live too far south of Salem and we are also told that Abram was a follower of the Most High God. What can we deduce from this?

It is very likely that Abram and Melchizedek weren't strangers. Shem outlived Abram by several years. The city of Salem was an outpost of YHWH worship in the region.. Therefore, there has to be some sort of tie to Noah as we go back in time to the period just after the flood extending through the dispersion at Babel up until the time of Abram. So, just who is the king/ priest of Salem?

The traditional Judaic interpretation was that the figure named as "Melchizedek" here, was Shem and that the priesthood after the flood was centered at Jerusalem (Salem). This is supported by the Book of Jasher which states: "And Adonizedek king of Jerusalem, the same was Shem, went out with his men to meet Abram and his people, with bread and wine, and they remained together in the valley of Melech. 12 And Adonizedek blessed Abram, and Abram gave him a tenth from all that he had brought from the spoil of his enemies, for Adonizedek was a priest before God." Book of Jasher 16: 11-12

The Lineage of the Priesthood

Before the division of the land in the days of Peleg, the descendants of Noah were of one language and under one priesthood which was centered at Jerusalem (Genesis 11). From the movement of the descendants of Noah after the Flood, and the known settlements of all these, the area of Jerusalem falls to either Shem and/or Arphaxad, seeing we know the settlements of the other sons in Genesis 10. Shem is called the father of all the sons of Eber (Gen. 10:21) which indicates that he remained the family head – i.e. the functioning priest during the lifetimes of all the sons of Eber. Therefore the conclusion is that Shem occupied the land of Jerusalem and was King of Salem (Jerusalem) up until, and during the lifetimes of Eber's sons.

In Genesis 10:22 the five male sons of Shem and their descendants are listed. But they did not inherit the position of priest according to the order of Melchizedek, as Shem maintained it during their lifetime and outlived them. In Gen. 11:10-26 an official list is given of the commencement of the order of Melchizedek after the Flood. YHWH seems to have isolated the lineage of the Melchizedek priesthood separately from the already given lineage of Shem's sons. There was no sense in repeating this portion of the genealogy just for the sake of repetition.

There are two types of priesthood mentioned in the scriptures; and they are the Levitical and the Melchizedek priesthoods. For the greater part of their history, Israel functioned under the Levitical priesthood.

The Levitical priesthood constituted the whole tribe of Levi being ordained to function as priests for the rest of the nation. This originated out of the default of the nation to be faithful to their covenant with YHWH at Sinai. This involved their sin of substituting the golden calf as their object of worship, in the absence of Moshe (Exodus 32). YHWH's original intention was that they be a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6) which is

according to the Melchizedek priesthood that had been passed down from the functioning "priest of the Most High God" (Melchizedek, king of Salem), onto Abraham in Genesis 14:18-20. "Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him (Abram) 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." And he gave him a tithe of all." - Genesis 14:18-20

In the Aramaic Peshitta text of Genesis 14:19 there is a slight variation that makes the ordaining of Abraham into the order of Melchizedek more obvious. It reads, "Blessed be Abram TO EL-Elyon". Most texts read "of" El Elyon. The word "TO" indicates the ordaining and setting apart of Abraham as a priest TO YHWH, as opposed to YHWH merely being His Elohim. This is a record of the priesthood being handed down to next contender in line for the position. *Jewish Encyclopedia*

"Whoa!" you say. It has to be Jesus because of what is said in the NT book of Hebrews. Well, we will look at that, but first I want to mention Psalm 110. It is a Messianic Psalm.

***1 The Lord said to my Lord,
"Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool."
2 The Lord shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion.
Rule in the midst of Your enemies!
3 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.
4 The Lord has sworn
And will not relent,
"You are a priest forever***

According to the order of Melchizedek.”
5 The Lord is at Your right hand;
He shall execute kings in the day of His wrath.
6 He shall judge among the nations,
He shall fill the places with dead bodies,
He shall execute the heads of many countries.
7 He shall drink of the brook by the wayside;
Therefore He shall lift up the head.

We see in verse 4 that Jesus is a priest “after the order of Melchizedek.” We aren’t told that Jesus was Melchizedek. We are told that He would be a priest after the ***order of Melchizedek***. That is, He (Jesus) would be a priest of the same type. So what does that mean?

Well, we have to ask ourselves what the differences are between the order of Melchizedek and the order of the Aaronic priesthood. The main difference was that the Levitical/ Aaronic priests could never be kings. You just had to be born into the tribe of Levi, for the most part. A priest in the order of Melchizedek was a priest AND king. This puts things in perspective and goes a long way to clarifying things.

“But wait!” you say. “Melchizedek was an eternal being according to the book of Hebrews.” Let’s look at those verses.

Heb. 6:19 – 7:3

19 This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, 20 where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

1 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, 2 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,” 3 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.

So there you have it. Melchizedek had no genealogy, no beginning and no end. He didn't even have any parents. Therefore he has to be eternal. That's what the Bible says and that's what it means.

Well, not necessarily. There is this little thing called context.

Context – (1) the parts of a discourse that surround a word or passage and can throw light on its meaning

(2) the interrelated conditions which something exists or occurs: environment, setting

Many of us have been taught to read the rest of the immediate passage in order to find the context of a verse. That is correct, but it doesn't go far enough. As we just saw, according to Webster's dictionary, there are other related conditions that we must know in order to have the complete context.

We need to remember that although the Bible was written FOR us, it wasn't written TO us. We can't go at it from a Western mind-set. The Bible was written in the Middle East by Middle-eastern authors to Middle-eastern people. They didn't write like us, they didn't think like us, and they didn't live like us. We must know the conditions and environment of the writer and his audience in order to rightly divide the Word of God. Let me give you an example.

1 Tim. 2:8 – 15

8 I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; 9 in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, 10 but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works. 11 Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. 12 And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14 And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. 15 Nevertheless she will be saved in childbearing if they continue in faith, love, and holiness, with self.

According to the Apostle Paul, women are to keep their mouths shut in church, dress modestly and not braid their hair, wear jewelry or make-up. That's what it says isn't it?

That is what it says, but if we read this devoid of historical context we create a very oppressive atmosphere. Not to mention, most of us would never be able to get our wives to come to church. There are churches that teach this passage this way. And I'm afraid to say that in those churches the men look much better than most of the women.

Let me give you another example. If we are sitting in a fast food restaurant and I ask you if you want a drink, we are most likely talking about a coke or water. If we were sitting in a bar and I ask you if you want a drink, we are most likely talking about an alcoholic beverage. (You won't see me in a bar.) What is the difference? The difference is context; i.e. the setting and conditions in which the question was asked.

So, what did Paul mean about braiding hair, jewelry and women keeping silent?

- The context of Corinth, pagan temples and brothels.
- Braids were worn only by the wealthiest of women.
- Women teaching in the church/ synagogue put them in a place for which they weren't created. (Authority over a man)

Therefore, the context, if it isn't known causes us to get a false interpretation of the passage.

Now let's look at Hebrews again.

Heb. 6:19 – 7:3

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The book of Hebrews is known to many as "the better than book." As the title suggests, the book is written to a Jewish audience. The entire purpose of the book is to convince the Jewish audience that there is now a better system in place than that of the Law, which was anchored by the Levitical/ Aaronic priesthood.

To teach the people of that culture, writers and teachers, including Jesus employed many different literary and oratory devices. Two of the most common were metaphor and analogy. The writer of Hebrews, (Paul?) was using Melchizedek as an analogy or “type” in order to point the Jewish believers to Jesus. They were familiar with the Aaronic priesthood and had come to depend on it in order to reach God and feel His presence. If you continue reading Hebrews in chapter 10 you will see that they are encouraged to enter the presence of God, following our forerunner, Jesus, who is our King and priest.

Getting back to the question of Melchizedek having no parents or genealogy, we must refer back to the Genesis account of Melchizedek.

In Genesis chapter 14, Melchizedek is not mentioned by name, but by title only. There is no genealogy there and no mention of his parentage. Actually, he is mentioned only in passing.

The writer of Hebrews uses this to convey the message that Jesus is a priest after the order of Melchizedek, because He (Jesus) has no parentage. He is our priest/ king and will reign eternally. Once again, Jesus is said to be “after the order of Melchizedek, not Melchizedek himself. Context is so crucial here.

Therefore, all we can say about Melchizedek is that he is a “type” of Christ. This is not a Christophany because the language doesn’t allow for it. The language plainly says “after the order” of Melchizedek. You can’t have a Christophany AND a type in the same instance. The one does away with the other.

So, Melchizedek was a man and nothing else. He may have been Shem, but he definitely wasn’t Jesus. The fact that Jesus is a priest and king and is also eternal, making Him so much better than Aaron’s priesthood is the theme of this portion of Hebrews. The

references Melchizedek's lack of parentage is a literary device used by the author to make the point that Jesus is our eternal High Priest and King. That is the literary and historical context.

So what can we glean from all this?

- Jesus is so much better as a priest/ intercessor for us.
- We can now enter the presence of God following our forerunner – Jesus.
- We need to dig below the surface and discover the historical, cultural and literary context of a passage in order to understand it properly.
- And finally: Yes ladies, you can wear make-up.