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THE PRIESTHOOD OF MELCHIZEDEK

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THE PRIESTHOOD OF MELCHIZEDEK

The priesthood of Melchizedek is a mystery to people who study the Bible very deeply. This is largely due to the mystery about man, Melchizedek. We have reference to him in three places in the Bible. In Genesis we first meet the man when he comes to meet Abram after his slaughter of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him. The king of Sodom came to meet Abram to express his gratitude to Abram for delivering his kingdom from these powerful kings. He was expected, but it also says "and Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God."¹ In the Psalms we have a reference to him again. "The Lord has sworn and will not change: Thou art priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."² These words point directly to the Messiah. He was to be after the order of Melchizedek, not of the order of Aaron. Finally we have him mentioned in Hebrews, specifically chapter seven. The three chapters of Hebrews dealing with Melchizedek - five, six, and seven - retell the story of Melchizedek. The author comments largely on the words of the Psalmist and builds on them his discourse of Christ's priestly office, but built upon this which he shows was no new notion, but built upon this

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most sure word of prophecy. For, as the New Testament explains the Old, so the Old Testament confirms the New, and Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega of both.³

Who was this man called Melchizedek? We know very little about him, and it looks as if God saw fit to leave us in the dark about him. Man will not be satisfied with what is revealed to him, so we grope around in the darkness trying to answer the questions of our mind. Men have put forth many theories about him. Some have seen him as Gabriel, or another angel, or even as the Holy Ghost. The opinions concerning him that are but worthy of consideration are three: (1) Shem, son of Noah; (2) Jesus Christ; (3) just a man.⁴

The first theory seems to be held by the rabbin and most of the Jewish writers. Shem would have been priest and king to their Jewish ancestors, like the other patriarchs. This does not seem reasonable. Why should he change his name. We have no account of him settling in Canaan.

The second idea or theory is held by some Christian writers. They have said that this man called Melchizedek was Jesus Christ himself. It is said that he was appearing by a special dispensation and privilege to Abram in the flesh, and was known by him as Melchizedek. In John we find Christ talking to some Jews at the temple. There he tells

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tham, "Your father Abraham was extremely happy in the prospect of seeing My day, and he did see it and felt glad."⁵ This verse could be taken in the light that Abraham had some vision of Christ and his days. This vision could be through the man we call Melchizedek. It must also be pointed out that no mere man could be referred to in Hebrews 7:3, "Without father or mother or pedigree, with no beginning of days or ending of life, made to resemble the Son of God, he remains a priest in perpetuity."⁶

Probably the most widely held opinion is that he was a Canaanite, who reigned in the area of Salem, and kept up the worship and religion of the one true God. Possibly he was raised to be a Christ-type of man, and he was honored by Abraham as such. He appeared to him as a righteous king, having a righteous cause and giving peace.

Melchizedek is a figure of great importance in the Bible. He is generally recognized as the most mysterious and unaccountable of all historical personages. "His biography is short. He comes before us in history (Gen. 14), in prophecy (Ps. 110), in doctrine (Heb. 7); and prefigures Christ's priesthood. He is King of Righteousness, and King of Peace - cause and effect. Christ alone can bring us peace since He is our Righteousness."⁷ He appears before us in the King's Vale or Valley of Shaveh. No one really knows

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from where he came or where he went to when he disappeared, but he came with his hands full of substantial gifts for the wearied household of Abram, and the captive women that were with him. In the book consisting of genealogies, Melchizedek has no record of father, mother, birth, or death. Of each of the patriarchs we can tell the paternity; the date of birth, and the date of death; but this man stands with none to claim him. He forms no part of any series of links by which the oldest and the present times are connected. Though possessed with the knowledge of the Most High God, his name is not found in any of the records from which we trace the knowledge of the True God passing from father to son through the ages. Of all other great men the writer takes pains to carefully record their genealogy; but here the writer breaks his rule and breaks it where, had there not been a substantial reason, he would have adhered to it. For in Melchizedek we have possibly the greatest figure of the time, a man before whom Abram, the father of the faithful, the honored of all nations, bowed and paid tithes; and yet this man appears and passes away like unto a vision of the night. Perhaps even in his own time there was no man who could point to a chamber where he had been born, nor show the tent where played during his boyhood years, nor show any type of relic of the early years of this

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man, who possibly had risen to be the first man upon the earth in those days. This man is so mysterious that the Apostle speaks of him as a very type of all that is mysterious and abrupt in appearance and disappearance, "without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life," and he significantly adds, "made like unto the Son of God."⁸ This silence about him is a part of the divine plan to make him typify more strikingly the mystery of Christ's birth and the eternity of his priesthood. For as Melchizedek stands on the page of history, so does Jesus Christ. Melchizedek stands as one who has no pedigree. He holds an office beginning and ending in his own person. Jesus Christ, though born of woman, stands separate from sinners and out of the ordinary line of generations. He holds an office which he inherited from no man, and an office which he can pass on to no man. The priesthood of Melchizedek was not based on what he was, or on any inherited right. Christ was without father on earth as to his humanity, and without Mother as to his deity. He was the only begotten of the father, and without pedigree as to his priesthood. As the one stands apparently disconnected from all before and after him, so the Other in point of fact did thus emerge suddenly from eternity, a problem to all who saw Him, owning the authority of earthly

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parents, yet claiming an antiquity greater than Abram's, appearing suddenly to the captivity led captive, with his hands full of gifts, and his lips dropping words of blessings.⁹

Melchizedek is the one personage on earth whom Abram recognizes as his spiritual superior. Melchizedek was a priest of the Most High God, and that he blessed Abram. Abram then gives him a tithe of the spoils. Abram seems to be aware of the greatness of this man. The greatness of this man and his priesthood is shown in Abram paying the tenth of his spoils unto him and from Melchizedek's blessings upon Abram. In Hebrews 7:9 it says, "And one might say that through Abraham also Levi, the tithe receiver did pay the tithe."¹⁰ Levi received the office of priesthood from God and was to take tithes of the people. Yet even Levi, through Abram, paid tithes to Melchizedek, as to a greater and higher priest than himself. Because of this that high priest who should afterwards appear, of whom Melchizedek was a type, must be much superior to any of the Levitical priests, who paid tithes, through Abram to Melchizedek. Since Melchizedek was a priest of the Most High God, Abram is actually paying his tithe to God through Melchizedek. This is not just a courtesy extended to private citizens by one another. It was done in the presence of jealous watchful retainers. Men of rank, office, and

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position consider how they act to one another, and who should take precedence. Abram deliberately did and with a perfect perception of what he was doing, humbled himself before his superior. It was obvious that God's revelation of Himself was not as yet confirmed to one line summary from Abram to Christ. Abram recognizes that this Man has a knowledge of the true God, and he even bows to him as his spiritual superior in office, if not in experience. This would tend to show us how little jealousy Abram had of others that were also favored of God. It reveals how little he thought that his connection would be less secure if other men enjoyed a similiar connection. It also shows how heartily he welcomed those who with different sites and different prospects, yet worshipped the living God. It is evident to me how apt we are to limit God's ways of working, and how little we understand of the connection He has with those who are not situated as we ourselves are. While all our attention is focused on Abram carrying the whole spiritual hope of the world, there emerges from an obscure Canaanite valley a man nearer to God than Abram is. From how many unthought of places may men at any time come out of, we really can never tell.

In Hebrews 7:6b-7 we read, "And blessed him that had the promise. And without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better."¹¹ Melchizedek blesses Abraham in

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in this passage. He could be no ordinary man who could assume superiority over the friend of God, and from whom the great head of the Hebrew race would accept a blessing. Melchizedek is extended a great honor - in that it was his place and privilege to bless Abram. He who gave the blessing was greater than he who received it; and therefore Christ, who is of the type of Melchizedek, must belong to a high order and be greater than all the priests of the order of Aaron.

Melchizedek in Hebrew means King of Righteousness or 'The Righteous King'. This may have been a title adopted by a line of Kings, or it may have been given solely to this man. But these old Canaanites, if they were Canaanites, had gotten hold of a great principle when they gave this title to the King of theirs or Salem or Peace. They perceived that it was the righteousness, the justice of their King, that could best uphold their peaceful city. They saw that the right king for them was a man not grinding his neighbors by war and taxes, not overriding the rights of others. He was not always seeking enlargement of his own dominion. He was not merely a merciful man, inclined to treat sin lightly and leaning always to laxity; but this man, they would choose to give them peace was the righteous man, who might sometimes seem overscrupulous or sometimes over stern. He would be one who was sometimes called a

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romantic, while other times be called fanatical. But this man's aim would always be for justice to all parties concerned. Some of the subjects might not be able to love a ruler who made no more of their special interests than he did of others, but all would possibly be wise enough to see that only through equal justice to all could they have a lasting peace. It is the reflex of God's government in which righteousness, unflinching and invariable, setting forth holy laws and extracting punishment from all who break them. It is this that gives us hope of peace, that we know God has not left us to rule our own world.

Melchizedek was a king; he was anointed by his people. How much greater a King is Jesus Christ, who was anointed by God. God's government was laid upon his shoulders, and he rules overall for the good of his people. Melchizedek was also a righteous King, for that is the name given him. Jesus Christ is a rightful and righteous king--rightful in his title, righteous in his government. He is the Lord our righteousness; he has fulfilled all righteousness, and brought in an everlasting righteousness, and he loves righteousness and righteous persons, and hates iniquity. ¹² Melchizedek was the King of Peace.

Jesus Christ speaks peace, creates peace, is our peace.

Why must our Saviour be of the order of Melchizedek rather than of the Levitical order. In Hebrews 7:11-12 we

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read, "If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood, (for under it the people received the law,) what further need was there that another priest should rise after the order of Melchizedek, and not be called after the order of Aaron? For, the priesthood being changed,

there is made of necessity a change also of the law".¹³
Several things are put forth in these verses. It asserts that perfection cannot come from the Levitical priest-

hood and the law. It also says that another priest must be raised up, after the order of Melchizedek, by whom, and his law of faith, perfection might come to all who obey him. It is also put forth that if the priesthood is to be changed; it would be necessary to change the law also. Since there is so near a relation between the priesthood and the law, the dispensation could not be the same under another priesthood. A new priesthood must be under a new regulation, managed in another way, and by rules proper to its nature and order. In verses 13 and 14 we are told that the law was changed. "For he of whom these things are spoken pertaineth to another tribe, of which no man gave attendance at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Judah; of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood".¹⁴

These verses show that the priesthood and law by which

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perfection could not come are avolished. They show that a dispensation is now set up, by which true believers may be made perfect. That Jesus sprang from the royal tribe of Judah, not from the priestly trive of Levi shows that the change in the law has been made. The Apostle in Hebrews intentionally uses a term that glances at the prophet Zechariah's perdition concerning Him Who shall arise as the dawn, and be a Priest upon His throne. We shall then call him 'Lord' and say 'our Lord' has risen out of the tribe of Judah. In Melchizedek we have a king. Jusus Christ is Lord and King by right of birth. The tribe of Judah is the Kingly tribe. By the transference of the priesthood from Aaron to Judah, He then is a priest and king. Moses says nothing of the tribe of Judah in reference to priests, but it is known for its kings. This circumstance, that ~~He~~ belongs to the tribe of Judah, hints that the priesthood has been changed.

It is still more evident that the Aaronic priesthood has been set aside if we recall another feature in the allegory of Melchizedek. For Jesus is like Melchizedek as a Priest, not only as a King. The priesthood of Melchizedek sprang from the man's inherent greatness. How much more is it true of Jesus Christ that His greatness is personal. He became what he is, not by force of law,

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which could create only an external carnal commandment, but by innate power, in virtue of which He will live on and His life will be indestructible. The commandment that constituted Aaron priest has not indeed been done away with; but it has been thrust aside in consequence of its own inner feebleness and uselessness. Before, in the Levitical priesthood, priests were made after the law of a carnal commandment; but our great high priest was made after the power of an endless life. The former law stated that the office should be passed from father to the eldest son, according to the order of carnal or natural generation; for none of the high priests under that law were without father or mother, or without descent. They had both beginning of days and end of life; and so the carnal commandment, or law of primogeniture, directed their succession, as it did in matters of civil right and inheritance. But the law by which Christ was constituted a priest, after the order of Melchizedek, was the power of an endless life. The life and immortality which he had in himself were his right and title to the priesthood, not his descent from former priests. This makes a great difference in the priesthoos, and in the economy too, and gives the preference infinitely to Christ and the gospel. The very law which constituted the

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Levitical priesthood supposed the priests to be weak, frail, dying, creatures, not able to preserve their own natural lives, but who must be content and glad to survive in their posterity after the flesh; much less could they, by any power or authority they had, convey spiritual life and blessedness to those who came to them. But the high priest of our profession holds his office by that innate power of endless life which he has in himself, not only to preserve himself alive, but to communicate spiritual and eternal to all those who solemnly upon his sacrifice and intercession.

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This former type of priesthood was weak and unprofitable, made nothing perfect; the latter brought in a better hope, by which we draw near to God. The Levitical priesthood could not justify men's sins, nor could it sanctify them from inward pollution. It could not cleanse the consciences of the worshippers from dead works; all it could do was to lead them to the idea that something good would come to pass eventually if they continued to follow the law as it was set up. The priesthood of Christ is completely different. It carries in it, and brings along with it, a better hope; it shows us the true foundation of all the hope we have towards God for pardon and salvation; it more clearly discovers

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the great objects of our hope. This type of priesthood tends to give us a more strong and lively hope of acceptance with God. By this hope we are encouraged to draw nigh unto God, to enter into a covenant-union with him, to live a life of converse and communion with him.

The former priesthood kept men at a distance, and under a spirit of bondage. ^{16.} That this type of priesthood That this type of priesthood has been weak and unprofitable to men is evident from the inability of the Law, as a system erected upon that priesthood, to satisfy conscience. Yet this carnal, ~~dec~~ decayed priesthood was permitted to linger on and work itself out. The better hope, through which we do actually come near unto God, did not forcibly put an end to it, but was added to it. Christ never formally abolished the old covenant. We cannot date its extinction. We must not say it ceased to exist when the supper was instituted, or when the real passover was slain, or when the spirit descended. ~~The~~ ~~epistle~~ ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~Hebrews~~ ~~is~~ ~~intended~~ ~~to~~

There is a change in God's way of acting in this priesthood. He has taken an oath to Christ, which he never did to any of the order of Aaron. God never gave them any such assurance of their continuance, never engaged himself by oath or promise that theirs should be an everlasting priesthood, and therefore gave them no

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reason to expect the perpetuity of it, but rather to look upon it as a temporary law, But Christ was made a priest with the oath of God. In Hebrews 7:21 we read, "The Lord hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." ¹⁷ Here God has upon oath declared the immutability, excellency, efficacy, and eternity, of the priesthood of Christ.

The entire system or covenant based on the Aaronic priesthood has passed away and given place to a better covenant, better in proportion to the firmer foundation on which the priesthood of Jesus rests. Beyond question, the promises of God were steadfast. But men could not realize the glorious hope of their fulfillment, and that for two reasons. First, difficult conditions were imposed on fallible men. The worshipper might transgress in many points of ritual. His mediator, the priest, might err where error would be fatal to the results. Worshipper and priest, if they were thoughtful and pious men, would be haunted with the dread of having done wrong. They might not even know or where, and be filled with dark forebodings. Confidence, especially full assurance was not to be thought of. Second, Christ found it necessary to urge his disciples to believe in God. The misery of distrusting God Himself exists. They

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mediator, but it is also true that the mediator was no surety, inasmuch as those priests were made without an oath, Christ has been made priest with an oath. Therefore He is, as Jesus, the Surety of a better covenant, ¹⁸ ~~what is the~~ ~~climax of the argument~~ is reached when the apostle infers the endless duration of Christ's one priesthood. The number of men who had successively high priests of the old covenant increased from age to age. Dying one after another, they were prevented from continuing as high priests. But Melchizedek had no successor, and the Jews themselves admitted that the Christ would abide forever. The ascending argument of the Apostle proves that He ever liveth, and has, therefore, an immutable priesthood. For, first, He is of the royal tribe, and the oath of God to David guarantees that of his kingdom there shall be no end. Again, in the greatness of His personality He is endowed with the power of an endless life. Moreover, as Priest He has been established in His office by oath. He is, therefore Priest forever.

Why is the endless life of one high-priest more effective than a succession, conceivably an endless succession, of high-priests? The eternal priesthood involves two distinct, but mutually dependent, conceptions. They

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found it hard to think of God really existing. Men think that He is such as they are; and, as they do not believe in themselves, their faith in God is a seed shaken by the wind. Their wants were not adequately met by the old covenant. The conditions imposed perplexed men, and the revelation of God's moral character and Fatherhood was not sufficiently clear to remove distrust. The Apostle directs attention to the strange absence of any swearing of an oath on the part of God when He instituted the Aaronic priesthood, or on the part of the priest at his consecration. Yet the kingship was confirmed by an oath to David, In the new covenant, on the other hand, all such fears may be dismissed. For the only conditions imposed is faith. In order to make faith easy and inspire men with courage, God appoints a Security for Himself. He offers His Son as Hostage, and thus guarantees the fulfillment of His promise. As the Man Jesus, the Son of God was delivered into the hands of men. 'Of the better covenant Jesus is the Surety.' This will explain a word in the sixth chapter. For it is there said that God 'meditated' with an oath. This means the appointment of Christ to be Surety for the fulfillment of God's promises. The old covenant could afford no guarantee. It is true that it was ordained in the hands of the

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are the power to save and intercession. In the case of any man, to live forever means power. Even the body of our humiliation will be raised in power. Can the spirit, therefore, in the risen life, its own native home, be subject to weakness? What, then, shall we say of the risen and glorified Christ? The difference between Him and the high-priests of earth is like the difference between the body that is raised and the body that dies. In Aaronic priesthood lies corruption, dishonor, and weakness; in Christ the priesthood is raised in incorruption, in glory, in power. In Aaronic priesthood is of natural origin; in Christ it is of spiritual origin. It must be that the high-priest in heaven has power to save constantly and completely. Whenever help is needed, He is living. But He ever lives that He may intercede. Apart from intercession on behalf of men, His power is not moral. It has no greatness, or joy, or meaning. Intercession is the moral content of His powerful existence. Whenever help is needed, He is living, and is mighty to save from sin, to rescue from death, and to deliver from its fear.¹⁹

In order for Jesus Christ to be our Saviour he had to come from a different order of priests. The priests of Aaron's order were men just like us. Christ can save us because he can make intercession for us to God.. How

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could anyone make reconciliation for us to God , unless He was perfectly righteous in his own person. Under the Order of Melchizedek Christ could be this mediator we need. He was Holy, without sin, and he was separate from sin from His birth beacause of the way He was born.

Melchizedek was a man. He does not seem as important as I thought he was to begin with. He was not very important in his own person. It is rather the part he played in setting the stage for Jesus Christ's appearance. Melchizedek was probably just a righteous King, who knew the One True God. His only importance is the fact that because we know nothing of his beginning or of his death he resembles one who has no beginning or ending. This is the same with Jesus. He lives forever and He is our high priest to God.

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4. Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1945), VI, 916.
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7. Herbert Lockyer, All the Men of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), I, 234.
8. W. Robertson Nicoll (ed.), The Expositor's Bible (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Company, 1947), VI, 516.
9. Ibid.
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11. Ibid.
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13. King James, op. cit., p. 240.
14. Ibid.
15. Matthew Henry, op. cit., p. 917.
16. Ibid.
17. King James, op. cit., p. 240.
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19. Ibid.

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