

God gave Israel the Levitical priesthood to represent the people before Him. But because of its inherent inadequacies, the Messiah would be a priest of a different order, that of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4). The author of Hebrews develops the significance of this obscure figure whose brief history is found in only three verses (Genesis 14:18–20). Yet the very brevity of the record contributes to understanding his significance in the interpretation by the author. He is elevated above even Abraham, his person foreshadows the Messiah, and his priesthood is the pattern for the Messiah's. The author argues in these verses for the superiority of his person and his priesthood.

**I. Melchizedek's personal superiority, explaining the reference in Psalm 110:4 (7:1–3).**

1. *It was an unusual encounter (for the historical record).* The introduction of Melchizedek into the story line seems to intrude into the thread of God's redemptive work in Genesis and the centrality of Abraham, until the importance of his character is understood. Psalm 110:4 reveals that importance and helps us understand why God brought Melchizedek into the record in the manner which He did.
2. *Melchizedek had an unusual name and titles.* His title in Genesis was priest of God Most High, the first mention of a priest in the O.T. and the first time this title for God is used. Giving significance to the etymology of names was not unusual and the author does so with Melchizedek, highlighting two Messianic attributes in his name: righteousness and peace (cf. Isaiah 9:6–7; Zechariah 9:9–10). His name and title form a typological tie to the Messiah.
3. *There is an unusual silence in the report about Melchizedek.* The description in verse 3 pertains to the silence in the historic record and not his physical existence. The first descriptive string – “without father, without mother, without genealogy” – contrasts with the importance of the right genealogy for the Levitical priests. The next descriptive phrase – “having neither beginning of day nor end of life” – arises from his sudden appearance and then disappearance in the record, without any mention birth or death. This silence stands out in the Genesis record, where genealogies, deaths, and even ages are regularly reported for all significant figures in the line of promise.
4. *There is an unusual or unexpected conclusion.* God moved men to record Scripture so that this character Melchizedek was “made like the Son of God” in the record, preparing for the association in Psalm 110 with the Messiah, the Son of David who was also David's Lord. Furthermore, as far as the record is concerned, Melchizedek remains a priest 'perpetually', picturing again the eternal priesthood of Christ in contrast to the Levitical priests.

The Biblical record of Melchizedek was designed by God to stand out and to be used later as a picture of the type of priesthood which the Messiah would have. Though appearing just briefly, he reveals a superiority over even important Abraham. It is an important reminder that no human figure should eclipse the importance of Jesus Christ in our lives.

**II. His priestly superiority, contrasted with the Levitical priesthood (7:4–10)**

The author picks up on key items from the historical account and offers four ways in which the priestly order of Melchizedek was superior to the order of the Levitical priesthood.

1. *Melchizedek accepted from Abraham a tithe (7:4–6a).* He acknowledged the rightness of Abraham's free gift to an ‘outsider’ in contrast to the legal mandate for the Levitical priests to collect from ‘brothers’.
2. *Melchizedek spoke God's blessing on Abraham (7:6b–7).* He did so by the authority of God (Genesis 14:19), which according to the author indicates his superiority over Abraham. His priesthood therefore was superior.
3. *Melchizedek “in a literary sense” lives on (7:8).* That is, the absence of an record of his death speaks figuratively of continued life, a further contrast to the tithe received “by dying men.” The priesthood of Melchizedek is superior because with it is associated a perpetual priesthood.
4. *Melchizedek received tithes even, in a manner of speaking, from Levi (7:9–10).* The idea of descendants being present within the ancestor was not foreign to the ancient culture (cf. Genesis 25:23), and in this sense Levi, whose descendants would collect tithes, paid tithes to Melchizedek, making his a superior priesthood.

Melchizedek was superior to Abraham, and his priesthood to that of Levi. Jesus Christ, who is the reality that Melchizedek foreshadowed, must be that much more superior. Our High Priest, Jesus Christ, is worthy of honor, the source of blessing, and lives on to intercede for us (7:25). Seek none other. Be satisfied in none other. Rejoice in the great privilege the believer has been given.

*Questions for further reflection and discussion:*

- Read Psalm 110. Verse 1 is quoted or alluded to a number of N.T. passages. Consider a few of those:
  - How was it used in **Hebrews 1:13**?
  - What was the point of Jesus' quote of it in **Matthew 22:44** (cf Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42)?
  - What was Peter's conclusion in his Pentecost sermon based upon Psalm 110:1 (**Acts 2:34ff.**)?
  - In light of this understanding of Psalm 110:1, of whom is God speaking in Psalm 110:4? How does this explain that Melchizedek was "made like the Son of God" (Hebr 7:3, NKJV)?
  
- What significance is placed upon giving a portion (a "tithe") to someone from what we have received? What was the first priority of the churches of Macedonia in their giving (2 Corinthians 8:1–5)? What might this say about the care we should exercise in how we give and in choosing what we support financially?
  
- The Psalmist refers to a brief account which had occurred eight centuries earlier and been recorded four centuries earlier. A millennium later the author of Hebrews uses both extensively to establish the superiority of Jesus Christ as the believer's High Priest. What does this tell us about the unity of Scripture? How does this affect how we should read Scripture? Are there ramifications for what makes a good translation?