

If *Hebrews* was a sermon before it became a letter, it could have been based on Psalm 110. That was a messianic psalm and was quoted or referenced at least seven times in *Hebrews*. (See 1:13; 5:6; 6:20; 7:17, 21; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2.) Quite obviously it was central to the author's conviction that Jesus was the Messiah/Christ and superior to all Jewish claims to the contrary.

Three times before the present passage *Hebrews* dealt with Jesus' superiority to the high priesthood in his person and function. (2:17; 3:1; 4:14) According to the law of Moses in Exodus 32:25-29 and Deuteronomy 33:8-11 all priests were supposed to descend from Levi, son of Joseph and great-grandson of Abraham. Moses' brother Aaron was the first high priest of the Levitical order.

Jesus, however, was of the tribe of Judah. How then could he be a priest, let alone of high priest? *Hebrews* solved the problem by introducing Melchizedek once again and in greater detail this time.

Hebrews was writing from the perspective of a deeply committed Christian for whom Jesus was the crucified and risen Lord, now seated at the right hand of God. He lives forever, the eternal Son of God. *Hebrews* matched that reality of the Christian faith tradition with Psalm 110:4 and the actual story of Abraham's meeting with Melchizedek in Genesis 14:17-20.

The story was both simple and brief. Invaders from east of the Jordan had captured Abraham's nephew Lot, his tribe and possessions. Lot was Aaron's son. Abraham pursued the invaders, freed the captives and recovered the stolen possessions. Returning from the victory, Abraham met Melchizedek, priest-king of Salem. After a feast celebrating the victory, Abraham received the blessing of Melchizedek in the name of "the God Most High." In return, Abraham shared one tenth of the spoils he had won in the battle with his enemies. A tenth of one's

possessions is regarded was the traditional Jewish tithe offered to God.

The rest of *Hebrews* interpretation of the passage deduced that because Melchizedek was superior to Abraham, having given Abraham his blessing (7:7). On the other hand, the Levitical priests accepted the tithes from Jewish worshippers. *Hebrews* almost playfully then suggests that even Levi himself had paid tithes to Melchizedek because he was Abraham great-grandson (i.e. "still in the loins of his ancestor" 7:7-9).

According to *Hebrews*, the silence of any reference in the story regarding Melchizedek's lineage, birth and death infers that his priesthood is eternal (7:3). The meaning of his name, "king of righteousness" and his kingdom of Salem ("king of peace" 7:2), indicates that he resembles the Son of God and is a priest forever.

This circuitous argument proves that Jesus Christ is a non-Levitical priest, but a priest just the same "after the order of Melchizedek."

To quote Don Schwager, a lay Roman Catholic commentator: "The *order of Melchizedek* indicates that Christ was not appointed to the Aaronic (i.e. Levitical) priesthood of the old covenant but to a priesthood that would replace it and would be greater, just as Melchizedek himself was greater than Aaron and even Abraham himself."

To us this interpretation may seem beyond irrational. It was perfectly good exegesis for the time. We must remember, however, that it was written using the only scriptures they had, the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament for the most part. One issue on which Christians and Jews disagreed was that of the ascension of Christ to the right hand of God followed by the gift of the Spirit.

OPENING PRAYER

It's half-way through Advent, Lord Jesus. Help me remember that you are waiting to enter my life today, where ever I let you in. Help me to open my heart in these remaining days of preparing for Christmas. AMEN.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The issue in this passage is the nature of intercession or approaching God in prayer seeking God's blessing. Why is this an important religious concern?
2. In what way does it not matter for us today whether or not Jesus was a Levitical high priest or a priest "after the order of Melchizedek?"
3. We often hear of parents praying for their wayward sons or daughters. For whom are these prayer of intercession most helpful?
4. Scripture interpretation has a long, evolutionary history involving a lot of conflict in Christian communities. Is there a better way to settle such disputes other than open division?

CLOSING PRAYER

Go before us, O Lord, with your most gracious favour, and further us with your continual help, that all our doing, begun, continued and ended in you, may to the glory of your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

9 – A PRIEST FOREVER

Hebrews 7:1-10.



Durer's Praying Hands

The story behind the original woodcut of this historic picture can be found here:

www.moytura.com/reflections/prayinghands.htm