

Jesus and Melchizedek

Peter Rüst, Feb. 25, 2007 Flüehli, Schwarzenburg

Texts (see Attachment): **Genesis 14:18-20; Psalm 110:1-4; Hebrews 6:13 - 8:2**

1. *The letter to the Hebrews*

The letter to the Hebrews is an anonymous letter addressed to the Jewish Christians. It was written about in the year 62, at any rate before the destruction of the Temple. The entire Old Testament sacrificial ritual was still being carried out. The first Jewish-Christian church in Jerusalem still took part in the temple worship, even *after* Pentecost, and observed the entire Mosaic law.

The church expected the Lord to return soon, during their lifetime. However, Jesus had told the disciples *before* Pentecost already that it would be pointless to ask him *when* he would return. They should *always* be ready for his coming (Acts 1:6-7):

⁶ So... they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority."

But decades went by, and he didn't come, while the church was persecuted. Thus, many of them asked themselves whether they had been mistaken about Jesus. They were tempted to return to Judaism. The letter to the Hebrews warns in extremely sharp words about such backsliding, by which they would destroy their only bridge to life (Heb. 6:4-6):

⁴ For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ if they then fall away, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

After experiencing Jesus and enjoying the mighty works of the Holy Spirit, one cannot simply return to Judaism. This would mean consciously repudiating Jesus, and therefore being lost. It would be evidence for not having been born again, but merely a hanger-on.

The Jews had a huge respect for the Mosaic law. But the letter to the Hebrews demonstrates that Jesus is greater than all this. The entire Old Testament points to the Messiah (=Christ) and to his substitutionary sacrifice on the cross. The new covenant takes over from the old, replacing it.

2. *Melchizedek*

Melchizedek was a central signpost to Jesus. But in all of the Old Testament, we find Melchizedek mentioned in two short passages only. Abraham defeated four kings who had kidnapped his nephew Lot. At that time, Melchizedek of Jerusalem came to meet him (Gen. 14:18-20):

¹⁸ And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) ¹⁹ And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; ²⁰ and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

Then we find Melchizedek in connection with David. God calls David "a man after my heart" (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). David was the greatest king of Israel. And it is through David that God says that the Messiah will be David's son, but also that he will be David's Lord (Psalm 110:1,4):

¹ A PSALM OF DAVID. *The LORD says to my Lord:* "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." ... ⁴ The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."

Apart from these two places, the Old Testament says nothing about Melchizedek. God presents Melchizedek as a "type", a bearer of prophetic import, pointing ahead to the Messiah Jesus, God's Son. Melchizedek was an ordinary human being. But *what* the Word of God reports of him - and also what it does *not* say - has prophetic significance. This is explained in Hebrews 7. (*Heb. 7:1-3*):

¹ For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, ² and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. ³ He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.

Jesus Christ, king of righteousness and king of peace, shall set up his kingdom of righteousness and peace. He is priest of God, the Most High. And he was from eternity and will be in all eternity.

3. Greater than Abraham

For the Jews, Abraham was greater than all, as he was their patriarch, chosen by God to be the progenitor of their nation. And as a nation, they were elected above all other nations. But Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and Abraham gave him the tenth part of everything (*Heb. 7:4,7*):

⁴ See how great this man was to whom Abraham the *patriarch* gave a tenth of the spoils! ... ⁷ It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.

Melchizedek points to Christ. In this way, Scripture shows us that Christ is greater than Abraham. In the old covenant, the priest stood between God and the people. He represented the people before God and God before the people. He was God's representative. Therefore, the priest took the tithe from the people (for the divine service). And in place of God, he blessed the people.

The Old Testament reports so little about Melchizedek - why then such an every-day triviality as his bringing out bread and wine to Abraham? Yet everything in these three short verses of Genesis 14:18-20 points to the Messiah. The Messiah, too, is greater than Abraham - and he is Abraham's Savior, too. Christ distributed bread and wine to his disciples, as a sign indicating that he was going to die for them on the cross, and that by means of this expiatory sacrifice they would be in communion with him, one with him (1 Cor. 11:23-26):

²³ ...that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Already with Melchizedek, God prophesied that his Son would sacrifice his body and his blood on the cross, in order to make possible the community of the believers in Jesus, in the new covenant.

4. Greater than Aaron

Talking about Abraham, I left out something about Levi, his great-grandson, the progenitor of the priests (*Heb. 7:5-10*):

And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham. ⁶ But this man who does *not* have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. ⁷ It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. ⁸ In the one case tithes are received by mortal men [the Levitical priests], but in the other case, by one of whom it is testified that he lives [Melchizedek]. ⁹ One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, ¹⁰ for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

The Mosaic law gave the priesthood to the Levites, the descendants of Levi. They alone were allowed to be priests. In the Old Testament dispensation, the Levitical priests were placed *above* the people, as they stood before God to offer sacrifices to cover the sins of the other Israelites. And they blessed the people in God's name. The high priest was placed over all other priests, and Aaron, the first high priest, had a higher standing than all later high priests, since they descended from him. Levi stood above Aaron, and Abraham, the patriarch, was above Levi.

But now Melchizedek stands above Abraham. Therefore, Melchizedek was certainly *not* under the Levitical priesthood. What then does it imply that God tells the Messiah: "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek"? (*Heb. 7:11*):

¹¹ Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of *Melchizedek*, rather than one named after the order of *Aaron*?

But this is exactly what God ordained. Thus, the Messiah shall be a priest who stands higher than Aaron. Therefore, the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would be completely wrong in supposing they could perhaps return to Judaism with its Aaronitic temple worship.

But the change is even more radical: not only is the priestly ministry now outdated in Jesus, but so is the entire Old Testament law (*Heb. 7:12-14*):

¹² For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.

¹³ For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is evident that our Lord was descended from *Judah*, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

The Jews knew that the Messiah, who was to reign as a king over Israel, would be of the tribe of Judah. On his deathbed, Jacob (=Israel), Abraham's grandson, blessed his sons, the progenitors of the tribes of Israel. About Judah he said, among other things (*Gen. 49:10*):

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

The word *Shiloh* is unknown. It could mean, "to whom it belongs". After Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, God said that there would be no more Davidic king, "until he comes whose right it is" (*Ez. 21:27*), that is, the Messiah. So, the Jews always correctly identified *Shiloh* as the Messiah. Thus, the kingdom rightfully belongs to the tribe of Judah. It began with David, was interrupted by the Babylonian exile, and shall only be re-established with the Messiah.

Already 200 years in advance, Micah had prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem (*4:10*). And after that, the eternal ruler over Israel, the Messiah, would come from the town of David (*5:2*):

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,... from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

5. The Messiah as eternal priest and king

During Israel's kingdom period, from Saul to the Babylonian exile, no Israelite king was allowed to also be a priest. It was then customary in each of the pagan neighboring nations that a priest-king ruled. Almost inevitably, this led to his being deified, and as a consequence, an absolutist dictatorship arose, without any separation of powers. The same problem recurred during the Middle Ages, when the pope considered himself a worldly sovereign over emperors and kings.

But the Messiah is different. His "origin is from of old, from ancient days" or "from everlasting" (*Micah 5:2*), i.e. he is God's Son, and therefore sinless. Consequently, he can be Israel's king and priest forever (*Heb. 7:15-17*):

¹⁵ This becomes even more evident [that the law must change] when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, ¹⁶ who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is witnessed of him, "You are a priest *forever*, after the order of Melchizedek."

Likewise, Melchizedek was king *and* priest. But for a king *and* for a priest, it was entirely unheard-of that neither his genealogy nor his death is mentioned. This is understandable only in the case of one who, as a "type", prophetically points forward to the eternal Son of God.

John says of Christ: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (*John 1:1*). Thus the Messiah is God. Therefore, he could, in Jesus, become man

without falling into sin. And so he could, by means of his own death, atone for all sin - and that for all who accept him by faith.

There is thus a novel situation. This is a further reason why God now, with Jesus, changes the old law and introduces a better covenant (*Heb. 7:18-22*):

¹⁸ On the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹ (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God. ²⁰ And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, ²¹ but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever.'" ²² This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.

The change of law is irrevocable and the new covenant in Jesus is definitive. God endorses it by an oath. Furthermore, this had always been God's plan.

6. A better covenant is needed

Why has the Mosaic law made nothing perfect? (*Heb. 7:23*):

²³ The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, ...

The Levitical priests could bring nothing but animal sacrifices, which were only a shadow of the genuine sacrifice which was to come. It was only Jesus who then offered the only effective sacrifice on the cross - "once for all". The Old Testament sacrifices were never able to really take away sins and save people to the uttermost. Again and again, new sacrifices were required. But death prevented all priests from continuing this service of propitiation.

Furthermore, they themselves were also sinners. Sinful humans can never stand before the holy God. They would be consumed immediately by his holiness, which is like fire. Only Christ is sinless and holy, i.e. separated for God. He can remain before God (*Heb. 7:24-26*):

²⁴ ...but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. ²⁵ Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. ²⁶ For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.

As sinners, the Levitical high priests always had to offer sacrifices for themselves first. But what we need is a different kind of high priest (*Heb. 7:27-28*):

²⁷ He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this *once for all* when he offered up himself. ²⁸ For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

7. The heavenly sanctuary

In the wilderness of Sinai, Moses was ordered to construct the "tent of meeting", the tabernacle, as a reproduction of the *heavenly pattern* that God showed him when he was on Mount Sinai. The temple Solomon built was more magnificent than the tabernacle, but spiritually only a reproduction. The second temple, which Ezra built, was a modest reproduction of the earlier temple. Herod then extended it magnificently, but still following the Jewish traditions. In the year 70 AD, the Romans destroyed this temple. But Jesus had told the Jews in advance (*John 2:19-22*):

¹⁹ ..."Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."... ²¹ But he was speaking about the temple of his body. ²² When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this...

Once every year, the Levitical high priests had to go into the earthly Most Holy Place to stand before God and offer the blood of a sacrifice. But Jesus has offered *himself* to God as a sacrifice for all sins, "once for all". This did not occur in the temple, but in the heavenly prototype of the

tabernacle. After his death, Jesus rose again bodily and went into the heavenly Most Holy Place, in order there to offer the sacrifice of his blood, his body, himself to God.

Every Levitical high priest *stands* before God. But Jesus *sat down* at the right hand of God, for his ministry of atonement was completed by the *one* sacrifice. He remains there in the heavenly Most Holy Place, in order to "intercede" with the Father always for the saints (the born-again), i.e. to intervene, make intercession on their behalf. Paul uses the word "intercede" in Romans 8:27,34:

²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God... ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died - more than that, who was raised - who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

All who place themselves in Jesus' hand by faith are born again by the Holy Spirit. They are then spiritually "in Christ" - and are members of his Church (Greek: *ekklesia*, the assembly of the called-out). Spiritually, all who are born again are members of Christ's body; Jesus himself being the head. God sees us *in him*.

Jesus is the *only* mediator between God and humans. Now, after his death on the cross, any earthly priesthood has finished its course, has become superfluous. Now only the general priesthood of all believers remains valid. In Jesus, they have a direct access to the Father. Any church which still has special "priests" after the resurrection of Jesus, calling all other Christians "laity", implicitly insults this only mediator.

Heb. 8:1-2, summarizing 6:13-7:28, says:

¹ Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² a minister in the holy places, in the *true* tent that the Lord set up, not man.

Thus, the Jewish Christians, whom the letter to the Hebrews exhorts, have no reason whatsoever to turn away from Jesus as their Messiah by reverting to the superfluous Aaronitic temple service. On the contrary, it would mean death. They would expose themselves to the just wrath of God and to the judgment of his Messiah. Really, in Jesus, the Messiah has already come.

8. The Messiah as king of all nations

Through Moses, God made the old covenant with the people of Israel. But from the beginning, God's objective included more. The old covenant was given to educate a nation and make them ready for receiving God's incarnate Son. In the Messiah, then, the new covenant was to be realized, the definitive salvation for all those who accept this Messiah as their Savior. And notably, this new covenant is offered not only to Israel, but to people of *all* nations.

God told Abraham: "...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). At that time, his name was still *Abram*. Later, Melchizedek blessed him. And still later, in view of the people of Israel, God made with Abram the covenant of circumcision and gave him his new name *Abraham* ("father of a multitude [of nations]"). The promise for all nations, then, stands *before* the promise for Israel. - And concerning Judah, Israel's patriarch Jacob said: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah... until Shiloh comes; and to him shall be the obedience of the *peoples*" (Gen. 49:10).

Before the foundation of the world already, God's plan was the salvation effected on the cross. This was not a new idea that only occurred to him after the first humans sinned, as a second-best possibility, a stopgap, as it were. In John 17:24, the expression "foundation of the world" refers to God's love for his Son, in Luke 11:50, Heb. 4:3, and Heb. 9:26 to the beginning of human sin. All other places are given below, and they show that human sin and redemption through the cross were considered in God's plan *before* or *since the foundation of the world*:

Jesus quotes Psalm 78:2, as reported in Mat. 13:35 - ..."I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden *since the foundation of the world*."

And according to Mat. 25:34, at the last judgment, he calls the redeemed ones: Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you *from the foundation of the world*.

Paul writes in Eph. 1:3-7 - ³ ...[God] has blessed us in Christ..., ⁴ even as he chose us in him *before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and blameless before him in love, ⁵ and he predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to himself,... ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood... according to the riches of his grace...

Peter writes in 1 Pet. 1:18-21 - ¹⁸ ...that you were ransomed from the futile ways... not with perishable things..., ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. ²⁰ He was foreknown *before the foundation of the world* but was made manifest in the last times for your sake, ²¹ who through him are believers in God...

John writes in Rev. 13:8 - And all who dwell on earth will worship [the antichrist], everyone whose name has not been written *before the foundation of the world* in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain.

And in Rev. 17:8 - ...And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life *from the foundation of the world* will marvel to see the beast [the antichrist], because it was and is not and is to come.

God created humans "in the image of God", capable of a loving relationship with him, therefore as *free* persons. This is possible only if they also have the possibility of sinning. And God knew from the beginning that all of them were really going to sin. Therefore, no human being can stand before God's holiness, everyone is lost. It is only the voluntary substitutionary sacrificial death of God's sinless Son which can succeed in bringing about what God wills: a genuine loving fellowship with humans. God also knew *before the foundation of the world* that not all humans let themselves be redeemed, many getting lost because they consciously reject Jesus.

9. Saved for eternity

The risen Christ is seated at the right hand of God, interceding for the redeemed. At conversion, they were born again, since the Holy Spirit came into their hearts, awakening them spiritually. In this way, he baptized them into the Church of Christ, i.e. into the body of Christ. They are now before God "in Christ"; their life is "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:1-3):

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

For each human being, there are but these two possibilities: either eternal life in Jesus, or eternal judgment under the wrath of God. Those belonging to Jesus have therefore eternal life in him, as the Scripture witnesses in an abundance of places, e.g. in John 3:36:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

Those who are born again have this eternal life in *this* life already. Now it is still invisible, hidden, but it is "hidden with Christ *in God*". And there, in God, it is in absolute security. Our assurance of salvation does not depend on anything that we ourselves did or did not do, but exclusively on God's love. Nothing can separate us from his love, for this guarantee is anchored in heaven, not in ourselves. Heb. 6:17-20 (introducing our text) comments on the promise God made to Abraham:

¹⁷ So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, ¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. ¹⁹ We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, ²⁰ where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

Attachment: Texts

Genesis 14:18-20

¹⁸ And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.)

¹⁹ And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth;

²⁰ and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

Psalms 110:1-4

¹ PSALM OF DAVID. The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool."

² The LORD sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies!

³ Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments; from the womb of the morning, the dew of your youth will be yours.

⁴ The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, "You are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."

Hebrews 6:13 - 8:2

^{6,13} For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself,

¹⁴ saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you."

¹⁵ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise.

¹⁶ For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation.

¹⁷ So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath,

¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

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¹² For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.

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^{8.1} Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven,

² a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.