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## Melchizedek: Exposing His Character and its Biblical-Theological Implications

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# Melchizedek: Exposing His Character and its Biblical-Theological Implications

## Abstract

Commentators have long recognized the mystery of Melchizedek, noting “that Melchizedek appears in the narrative out of nowhere and just as quickly is gone.” In light of the nature of this Melchizedek figure, the task for a deep reader of Scripture becomes not only identifying who this figure is as he appears in Genesis, but also drawing out the biblical-theological implications of his presence. To determine how to best understand Melchizedek as well as his presence within the canon, the most effective approach is to examine the text in which he first appears—Genesis 14:18-20—and examine its interplay with another key Melchizedekian-text—Hebrews 7:1-28. Upon gaining a firm grasp of Melchizedek’s character as explained in Genesis 14 and subsequently in Hebrews 7, we not only begin to understand him as a priest-king, but furthermore, our texts subtly suggest that the merging and coaction of these two offices in Melchizedek was how God always intended each of them to exist. Thus, the institution of the Levitical priesthood was a deviation from the perfect will of God, though not his permissive will.

## Keywords

Genesis 14:18-20, Priest and King, Difficult Aspects, Salem, 'el 'Elyon, Hebrews 7:1-10, Abraham and Levi, Hebrews 7:11-28

## Cover Page Footnote

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## Introduction

The book of Genesis carries with it not only some of the most foundational tenets of the Christian faith but also a generous number of difficult and enigmatic portions. Passages like Genesis 6:1-4, with its talk of “Nephilim” and “sons of God,” have been a center of Christian debate drawing forth a full spectrum of participants—scholars, pastors, and even laypeople. Adding to the list of perplexing passages is Genesis 14:18-20, where the cryptic figure Melchizedek is mentioned.

Commentators have long recognized the mystery of Melchizedek, noting “that Melchizedek appears in the narrative out of nowhere and just as quickly is gone.”<sup>1</sup> In light of what we might term the “Melchizedek mystery,” the task for a deep reader of Scripture becomes not only identifying who this figure is as he appears in Genesis but also drawing out the biblical-theological implications of his presence. To determine how to best understand Melchizedek as well as his presence within the canon, the most effective approach is to examine the text in which he first appears—Genesis 14:18-20—and examine its interplay with another key Melchizedekian-text—Hebrews 7:1-28. Upon gaining a firm grasp of Melchizedek’s character as explained in Genesis 14 and subsequently in Hebrews 7, we not only begin to understand him as a priest-king, but furthermore, our texts subtly suggest that the merging and coaction of these two offices in Melchizedek was how God always intended each of them to exist. Thus, the institution of the Levitical priesthood was a deviation from the perfect will of God, though not his permissive will.<sup>2</sup>

## Exposing the Character of Melchizedek

### Melchizedek in Genesis 14:18-20

Though Melchizedek is a character within Scripture who receives little mention, it seems that he holds a prominent position in each text which focuses on him. Texts that will be discussed below, like Hebrews 7, talk as if Melchizedek was a thoroughly significant individual. Each of these texts, however, only builds upon the first mention of Melchizedek, which occurs in Genesis 14:18-20. Not only is Genesis 14 the first text that mentions Melchizedek, it is also the only text out of

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<sup>1</sup> John Sailhammer, “Genesis,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Genesis-Leviticus*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 165.

<sup>2</sup> Due to the scope and limitations of this discussion, once the implications of Melchizedek’s person are drawn into the mix, sole focus will be placed on him as opposed to the Levitical priesthood. Though beneficial, there is not enough space here to delve into an exposition of the Levitical priesthood, what it entailed, etc.

the few which explores his character with any explicit historical element. Each Melchizedek passage following Genesis 14 only seeks to expound upon the significance of his initial appearance, and so the controlling factor of discussion as it relates to our character of interest must be Genesis 14.<sup>3</sup> As a result, it is imperative that a short analysis of this text is the first step in conceiving Melchizedek.

### **The Straight-Forward Aspects of the Text**

In the interest of organization, it is perhaps most helpful to begin our analysis of Genesis 14:18-20 by deciding on what seems to be the clearest within these verses regarding Melchizedek and then move on to those aspects that are more difficult. The setting within which verses 18-20 find themselves is a unique place where Genesis and the broader category of patriarchal narratives is concerned. As Von Rad and many others have noted, chapter 14 “differs from that of all the patriarchal stories.”<sup>4</sup> Here, we see Abram taking part in a military campaign against various kings to rescue his nephew, Lot. Nowhere before or after this chapter do we find Abram taking part in military activity, and this becomes one of the few reasons it stands out so uniquely.<sup>5</sup> When we arrive at verse 18 of the story, Abram has already secured his victory over the various kings of the text and has rescued Lot.<sup>6</sup> Verses 17-24 in the sequence of narrative acts as the climax to the story where

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<sup>3</sup> Kam-Yau A. Chan, “A Literary and Discourse Analysis of the Melchizedek Passages in the Bible: A Case Study for Inner- and Inter-Biblical Interpretation” PhD diss., Trinity International University, 2002, ProQuest Information and Learning (3047826), 72.

<sup>4</sup> Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1972), 175.

<sup>5</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 389-90. Given the nature of the uniqueness of Genesis 14, there has been much source-critical debate surrounding the historicity and reliability of this pericope within the narrative of Genesis. Scholars have vigorously sought to identify the source for this account with no absolute consensus, though generally they agree that it is outside the typical pentateuchal sources J, E, D, P. Some suggest that it is a fictional account which was added to the Abrahamic narrative much later while some believe it is simply an ancient story-tradition which made its way into the text. While the historical concerns of this chapter are an important topic, they are outside the scope of this discussion and will therefore attract only mention. Though some skepticism surrounds Genesis 14, there are still many good reasons to believe its historical veracity and integral connection to the rest of the Genesis narrative.

<sup>6</sup> Again, just like with the broader chapter, there is also much debate surrounding the nature of verses 18-20 in this story. Many suggest that 18-20 is a late addition to the narrative because of the quickness with which Melchizedek enters and exits. Though a popular opinion, there are enough links in 18-20 with the surrounding text to doubt such a conclusion. For example, Abram’s reference to Yahweh as “the Lord God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth” while speaking to the king of Sodom seems rather out of place without the previous identical reference in verse 19 (Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI:

there is a quasi-celebration of Abram's victory along with the mention of two others who meet him "at the valley of Shaveh"—the king of Sodom and Melchizedek (Gen. 14:17).<sup>7</sup> Thus, our mysterious character enters.

### Melchizedek as Priest and King

After a quick reading, verses 18-20 and the immediate context seem to make plain three aspects of Melchizedek: he is the king of Salem, he is a priest of 'el 'Elyon ("God Most High"), and he offers bread and wine to Abram as well as blesses him upon the recognition of his victory.<sup>8</sup> First, we notice his kingship. Though it is of no groundbreaking significance that he is recognized as a king since that was, of course, an office typical of the time, the text seems to offer Melchizedek as the primary king of the region given the large portion of spoils he receives from Abram's battles.<sup>9</sup> What is of more significance is his recognition as a priest alongside his recognition as a king. Here, we have the very first individual recognized as a priest in the Bible.<sup>10</sup> Such a reality cannot be quickly glossed over considering the importance of the priestly office later in Scripture. At the very least, Melchizedek, being identified as the first priest in Scripture, should relay the fact that he is an important character regardless of the brevity of his stay in the narrative. Furthermore, portraying Melchizedek as both priest and king identifies him closely with Abram, which then dispels some of the foreignness of his character. Though neither title is applied directly to the patriarch, Abram performs priestly duties—like building altars (Gen. 13:18)—and he is recognized later in Genesis as performing kingly activities when he encounters Canaanites in chapter 23.<sup>11</sup> Before moving on, one more interesting aspect to note is that nowhere else in the Pentateuch is the office of king and priest so clearly and explicitly merged as it is here in Melchizedek. Thus, "[l]ong before the Israelite priesthood was set up, another kind of priesthood, a royal one, was already in place in biblical history."<sup>12</sup>

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Zondervan, 1987], 306-7. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the NASB version).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 315.

<sup>8</sup> M. Delcor, "Melchizedek from Genesis to the Qumran Texts and the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 2, no. 2 (1971), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1308017902?accountid=12085&pq-origsite=summon>, 115.

<sup>9</sup> John J. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 418.

<sup>10</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 316.

<sup>11</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 410.

<sup>12</sup> Chan, "A Literary and Discourse Analysis," 94-5.

## Melchizedek and His Disposition

Moving on from Melchizedek's identification as both priest and king, our text also informs us that the priest-king offers bread and wine to Abram as well as blesses him. To specify that Melchizedek brought bread and wine to Abram is to point out the wealth, prestige, and generosity of his character. The typical diet of those at the time was bread and water, not bread and wine, and so to offer Abram such a meal was no small affair and highlights the kindness and wealth of Melchizedek.<sup>13</sup> Further accentuating Melchizedek's generosity, the king of Sodom stands as his foil character in verses 21 and following—while the priest-king gives above and beyond, the king of Sodom gives nothing.<sup>14</sup> Finally, before his quick departure, Melchizedek is described as blessing Abram.

First and foremost, this “benediction reflects an attitude of gratitude to Abram for his bold stroke against the eastern horde.”<sup>15</sup> Far more significant, however, is “that because Melchizedek blessed Abram, divine blessing would rest on [Abram's] successors, the priest-kings of Jerusalem.”<sup>16</sup> At every turn of our text, Melchizedek is portrayed as a foreigner who nonetheless stands as someone of striking import: a wealthy and generous priest-king who blesses God's people. As the canon continues, this understanding of Melchizedek's importance is only confirmed.

## The Difficult Aspects of the Text

Though we now have a firm grasp on the character of Melchizedek, our next task must be to address the difficult aspects of verses 18-20. The two most difficult aspects within this narrative concern identifying two entities of mention: Salem and *'el 'Elyon*. At first glance, these seem to be referencing Jerusalem and Yahweh respectively. If true, Melchizedek's correlation with these entities would place him well within OT thought and belief and would potentially cast him in the likeness of a proto-Israelite similar to Abram.<sup>17</sup> Coming to such a conclusion, however, is more difficult than one might think.

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<sup>13</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 316.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>15</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 411.

<sup>16</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 322.

<sup>17</sup> On the other side of the spectrum from those who view Melchizedek as a proto-Israelite and one similar to Abram are those who rather see the Melchizedek figure as one of the few examples of OT Christophany/theophany. This view has not been an overly popular opinion throughout history though some modern scholars none-the-less advocate for its validity. Therefore, it is a view that deserves brief mention. There are a few compelling points that discount the grounds for taking Melchizedek as a Christophany: (1) in no other true OT theophany is God connected so closely with an earthly establishment like Melchizedek is with the city of Salem, (2)

### The Identification of Salem

First, we approach the issue of Salem and its identification. At the outset, any immediate assimilation between Salem and Jerusalem is only presumption since it is not automatically clear that these are identical places.<sup>18</sup> Up to this point in the biblical narrative, Jerusalem has not been abbreviated as Salem. To suggest that it is nonetheless obvious that Jerusalem is meant here is to miss the fact that it was very atypical for Hebrews to shorten a compound name by excluding the first portion of that name. Typically, Hebrews shorten words by excluding the final syllable or excluding sounds from the interior of the word.<sup>19</sup> While this is the case, based on Psalm 76:2, Salem is generally understood to reference Jerusalem in our text.

Further explanation for why it might be proper to connect Salem with Jerusalem is due the fact that “the first element of ‘Jerusalem’ (*yeru-*) is the word for ‘city’ in Sumerian (*uru*), as is evidenced by the Sumero-Akkadian name for Jerusalem, *uru-salim*.”<sup>20</sup> So, Jerusalem had been given a Sumerian name by the time of our text which was long before King David ever appeared on stage to establish the city as the Israelites came to know it.<sup>21</sup> Understanding it in this light gives credence to why it would be abbreviated—it is being referenced according to Sumerian tradition and not necessarily Hebrew tradition.<sup>22</sup> It is not hard to see why the first portion of *uru-salim* would be dropped since, based on the context of verses 18-20, it becomes clear that Salem is being referenced as a city, and the addition of *uru* would be rather redundant.

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phrases like “the Lord appeared” or “the angel of the Lord said” which are characteristic of every OT theophany are missing from the Melchizedek account, and (3) viewing Melchizedek as a Christophany disagrees with Hebrews because, in accordance with the major thrust of the book’s arguments, Jesus is offered as one better than Melchizedek (Heb. 7:22)—it would make no sense to argue that Christ is better than Himself. These points taken together, along with others that could be brought up, make a strong case against understanding Melchizedek as a Christophany/theophany (James A. Borland, *Christ in the Old Testament: Old Testament Appearances of Christ in Human Form* [Geanies House, Fearn: Mentor, 1999], 145-6).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>19</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 409.

<sup>20</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 410.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Von Rad also suggests “that the full name of the city was intentionally avoided because it was too closely associated with the specific ideas of faith of a later period” (Von Rad, *Genesis*, 179). This further supports the conclusion suggested above that there is a dialectic between how Jerusalem was understood during the time of the narrative versus how it was understood later in Israelite history.

### The Identification of 'el 'Elyon

While not a definitive case, it seems highly likely that by speaking of Salem, our text is referencing Jerusalem. It has yet to be shown, however, how we should conceptualize the reference to 'el 'Elyon in verse 18. After a cursory reading of the text, it seems plain that 'el 'Elyon refers to Yahweh, but this would again be too presumptuous without first digging deeper. Up to this point in Scripture, nowhere has Yahweh been specifically referenced as 'el 'Elyon. To be sure, there are multiple places in Scripture where Yahweh is called 'Elyon, but there is only one other place in the Bible that Yahweh receives this specific title with 'el as its prefix: Psalm 78:35.<sup>23</sup> Due to such sparse usage, it becomes questionable whether we should take each instance as certainly in reference to Yahweh.

Furthermore, we must allow two other pieces of data to inform our understanding of the title 'el 'Elyon: Melchizedek is almost certainly from the region of Canaan, and the chief god of the Canaanite pantheon is named *El*.<sup>24</sup> While granting that the Semitic word for “God/god” is *El* which would make this a common title when referencing the various gods within the various Semitic pantheons, in Canaanite tradition, it seems that there is precedent for understanding the generic title as being used more narrowly than to simply address ‘the gods.’ As a result, many have concluded that Genesis 14’s reference to 'el 'Elyon “must have been [used to address] an old Canaanite deity.”<sup>25</sup>

While an extensive look at this issue is outside the purview of our discussion, a few points are determinative enough to arrive at a conclusion. First, though there is some consensus that 'el 'Elyon refers to a single Canaanite god, the eighth century BC Aramaic inscription of Sefire suggests otherwise. Among references to various Canaanite gods within this inscription, *El* and 'Elyon are distinguished from one another and understood as two separate deities rather than one.<sup>26</sup> For Melchizedek to then combine these names in reference to one deity would be akin to an ancient Greek combining the names Zeus and Athena to refer to one deity—it would not make sense. Second, keeping in mind that Melchizedek describes 'el 'Elyon as “Possessor of heaven and earth” in verse 19, we can bring two more ancient artifacts to bear on this issue: an ancient text written by a Semetic figure named Sanchunyathon as well as an inscription from Leptis Magna in Tripolitania. Together, these artifacts show “that *El* was actually recognized as the Lord of Earth, and had no connection whatever with Heaven.”<sup>27</sup> It would be non-

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<sup>23</sup> G. Levi Della Vida, “El 'Elyon in Genesis 14:18-20,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 63, no. 1 (1944), [https://www.jstor.org/stable/3262503?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3262503?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents), 1-2.

<sup>24</sup> Walton, *Genesis*, 419.

<sup>25</sup> Della Vida, “El 'Elyon in Genesis 14:18-20,” 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

sensical for Melchizedek to take a Canaanite god exclusively related to earth and ascribe authority over the entire cosmos to that god as he does in our text. Taking these together, it is clear that 'el 'Elyon in Genesis 14 “corresponds to no actual deity in the Canaanite pantheon.”<sup>28</sup>

We now understand 'el 'Elyon in the negative sense. That is, we understand to what the title is *not* referring. Positive understanding, however, must still be offered. Directly following our passage of interest, in verse 22, 'el 'Elyon is clearly identified as Yahweh. Therefore, we have good reason to believe that it is He to whom Melchizedek is referring.<sup>29</sup> Further evidence is provided for such a conclusion when we see Abram tithe to Melchizedek. Made clear by this kind of gesture, Abram not only accepts and recognizes the validity of Melchizedek's blessing, but also his priesthood to 'el 'Elyon (cf. Num. 18:21).<sup>30</sup>

Though it may be unclear whether Melchizedek was explicitly a true follower and receptor of Yahweh's salvation, there are strong textual clues supporting this kind of conclusion. At the very least, by Melchizedek's confession of Yahweh as 'el 'Elyon, he is participating in theological reflection. Through his merging of two chief gods among the Canaanite pantheon within this epithet and subsequently applying it to Yahweh, Melchizedek may be recognizing the true sovereignty of Abram's God over and above the gods he was familiar with.<sup>31</sup> In other words, the way Melchizedek chose to make sense of Yahweh's authority and power was by using what he was familiar with and applying it to the Jewish God. Therefore, Abram's affirmative gestures toward Melchizedek could be interpreted as approving of this Yahwistic confession. Since confessions typically arises out of belief, “[t]he bottom line is that Abram clearly recognizes Melchizedek as one who shares his faith in the same God.”<sup>32</sup> As offered at the outset of this section, and in light of our discussion up to this point, it seems that we can more clearly understand Melchizedek as a figure corresponding nicely with OT thought and belief. The task now becomes uncovering the implications of that correspondence.

#### Melchizedek in Hebrews 7:1-10

Another quintessential text related to Melchizedek is Hebrews 7:1-10, and so it is here where we now turn. Hebrews 7 is typically split into two major sections comprising of verses 1-10 and verses 11-28. The first of these sections focuses on interpreting Genesis 14:18-20 and drawing out some of the critical aspects of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>29</sup> Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, 410.

<sup>30</sup> Sailhammer, “Genesis,” 166.

<sup>31</sup> Della Vida, “El 'Elyon in Genesis 14:18-20,” 9.

<sup>32</sup> Tremper Longman III, *The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 187.

Melchizedek therein. The second section focuses on interpreting Genesis 14 through the lens of Psalm 110:4, which reads, ““You are a priest forever // According to the order of Melchizedek.”” It is within the second section where the author of Hebrews offers some of the implications of Melchizedek in light of Christ.<sup>33</sup> Keeping in mind that our discussion has not yet crossed over into addressing the implications of Melchizedek’s character, the first section of Hebrews 7 captures our attention. In Hebrews 7:1-10, there arises one major line of argumentation: Melchizedek is superior to Abraham and is therefore superior to the Levitical priesthood.<sup>34</sup>

### **Melchizedek is Superior to Abraham and Levi**

Appreciatively, since the argumentation of Hebrews 7:1-10 is fairly straightforward, not much time needs be spent at this juncture. We have shown that Genesis 14:18-20 casts Melchizedek somewhat in the *likeness* of Abraham, but Hebrews 7 rearranges this idea and casts Melchizedek as *superior* to Abraham. Certainly, Abraham was a vastly important character within the biblical narrative, but the author of Hebrews makes clear that Melchizedek was yet greater. Not only this, but the author explains how Melchizedek’s superiority over Abraham also trickled down to superiority over Abraham’s descendants. Since “[t]he ancestor embodies, symbolizes, and represents the whole group of his descendants,”<sup>35</sup> verse 9 declares that Melchizedek was superior to Levi just as he was superior to Abraham.

Primarily, “[t]he superior greatness of Melchizedek appears in two important respects: he accepted tithes from Abraham and bestowed his blessing on Abraham.”<sup>36</sup> Though it is not difficult to see why Abraham tithing to Melchizedek shows the latter’s superiority—since it is logical that the inferior pay tithes to the superior—a brief note regarding tithes and their place in the Levitical priesthood

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<sup>33</sup> William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1991), 159. Though Psalm 110:4 is a significant text related to this discussion, since Hebrews 7 interprets Genesis 14 through the lens of the psalm, dealing with Hebrews 7 in one sense also deals at least somewhat with Psalm 110:4. For this reason, Psalm 110 is not expounded upon within its own right here even though it would be beneficial to do so. In its own context, Psalm 110 teaches that God helps the king of His people and oversees the politics within which the king is involved. Perhaps the most significant teaching of the psalm is that it suggests the king to also be a priest. While it may not have any obvious messianic leanings, the author of Hebrews none-the-less draws out messianic implications of the text (John Goldingay, *Psalms: Psalms 90-150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008], 299).

<sup>34</sup> George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 254.

<sup>35</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 168.

<sup>36</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 162.

serves to accentuate this truth. Based on law instituted after the happenings of Genesis, of which the author of Hebrews would have been familiar, it was to the Levites that the people of Israel gave their tithes to then be distributed to the priests (Lev. 18:21; Num. 18:26). In a very real sense, this gave the Levitical priesthood a legitimate right to claim ownership over the people's tithes.<sup>37</sup> As those who possessed the right, then, the Levites possessed the superiority as well. Recognizing that Abraham is the ancestral representative of the Levites, the author of Hebrews clarifies that this shift in paradigm—i.e., the odd nature of Abraham tithing to Melchizedek—is of great significance concerning the argument of superiority.

Melchizedek also displays superiority in his act of blessing Abraham. No more needs to be said than is offered in Hebrews 7:7: “But without any dispute the lesser is blessed by the greater.” Though this is not to suggest that it is only ever those who are superior that give blessings, it is still typical that the mode of blessing flows from superior to inferior.<sup>38</sup> There is no shortage of examples that support this reality: God promises a blessing to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), Jacob blesses his sons (Gen. 49:1-28), David blesses Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 9:7-14), and much more.

### **The Implications of the Character of Melchizedek**

Albeit not exhaustively, Melchizedek and his character have been well enough exposed up to this point that we now have a firm grasp on who he was based on the biblical witness. The next task then becomes uncovering how we should understand the implications of his person. Primarily, the way we must excavate the implications of Melchizedek is by first recognizing his typological function. Though introduced in verses 1-10, it is not until the second half of Hebrews 7 where the majority of explanation regarding Melchizedek's typological function is found. Essentially, in Hebrews 7:11-28, we see that “the priest-king who encountered Abraham (Gen. 14:18-20), to whom the Messiah was later compared (Ps. 110:4), was a prefigurement of Christ, since, like Jesus, he held both the regal [i.e., kingly] and sacerdotal [i.e., priestly] offices simultaneously.”<sup>39</sup> Understanding this, we can now investigate our type—Melchizedek—through the lens of our antitype—Christ.

#### Melchizedek and Christ in Hebrews 7:11-28

The purpose of this discussion is not a robust exegesis of Hebrews 7 and so only important highlights regarding verses 11-28 will be addressed. In the first block of thought, verses 11-19, the author argues that the Levitical priesthood of

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<sup>37</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 169.

<sup>38</sup> Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 255.

<sup>39</sup> Chad L. Bird, “Typological Interpretation within the Old Testament: Melchizedekian Typology,” *Concordia Journal* (2000), 50-1.

the OT is obsolete which thus raises the question as to what order of priests could have fulfilled what the Levitical priesthood did not. The answer is that it is Christ, who is a priest “according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 7:11), who can fulfill what the Levitical priesthood could not. The underlying implication is that it was only one according to the priestly order of Melchizedek who could have actually fulfilled the purposes God originally intended for the Levitical priesthood. As a Melchizedekian priest, Christ has ushered in a new and better hope “through which we draw near to God” (Heb. 7:19). Second, in verses 20-22, the author of Hebrews yet again raises the Melchizedekian priesthood above the Levitical priesthood by explaining that while the latter was established and continued through genealogical succession, the former was established by an incontestable oath given directly from God.<sup>40</sup> Thirdly, in keeping with his point in verse 3 that Melchizedek and his associated priesthood had “neither beginning of days nor end of life,” the author of Hebrews makes his final point in verses 23-25 that “[t]he timeless character of Melchizedek’s priesthood pointed to the eternity and finality of the new priest [who is Christ].”<sup>41</sup> The final verses of the chapter act as a summary and presents a few extraneous details.

#### Melchizedek as a Superior Priest-King

Pulling together all that has been discussed, we find that Melchizedek is an important character as presented in Genesis 14—he is a wealthy and generous priest-king who is at least textually connected with Jerusalem as well as Yahweh. Furthermore, Hebrews 7:1-10 teaches us that based on the tithe Melchizedek receives from Abraham and the blessing he gives, Melchizedek is not only important but is actually superior to Abraham and, therefore, Levi. Hebrews 7:11-28 then takes up the mantle and submits Melchizedek—who is a priest-king—as a type of Christ—who is *the* priest-king—exclaiming that Melchizedek’s priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood. It must not escape the notice of the student of typology that Melchizedek is indeed unique even where the typical type-antitype study is concerned. It seems that the author of Hebrews “places [Melchizedek] on a typological plane far above others. He is a type who bears such striking similarities to the antitype that the two, although [certainly] not synonymous, are virtual alter egos of one another.”<sup>42</sup>

What must we then conclude regarding the implications of Melchizedek as interpreted through the typological lens of Christ in Hebrews 7? Since the author of Hebrews makes clear that the purposes of God could not be, and were not, fulfilled through the Levitical priesthood, it must have then been a different

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<sup>40</sup>Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 265.

<sup>41</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 1-8*, 197.

<sup>42</sup> Bird, “Typological Interpretation,” 51.

priesthood altogether that was meant to fulfill the true intentions of the Levitical functions. In other words, “the Aaronic [Levitical] priesthood did not exhaust the mediatorial functions which, in God’s purpose, were to be discharged between him and the human race. If God had intended the Aaronic priesthood to inaugurate the age of perfection, the time when men and women would enjoy unimpeded access to him, why should he have conferred on the Messiah a priestly dignity of his own—different from Aaron’s and by implication superior to Aaron’s?”<sup>43</sup> And indeed, this different priesthood was the Melchizedekian priesthood. Based on the implications of Hebrews 7, *it was only ever the offices of priest and king merged together which could “inaugurate the age of perfection” since it was in Christ, who perfectly merged these offices, that the inauguration was realized.* Melchizedek, then, was not simply a king who met Abraham after his victory in battle. The implications of Melchizedek’s person as a priest-king tell us that there was a true and better alternative priestly order in the OT all along.

Now, looking back into Genesis and the OT according to this understanding, we can readily see such a conclusion to be true even within the OT’s own milieu. Indeed, it was not until the Levitical priesthood was established that the idea of separating the royal and sacerdotal offices was even conceived of. For example, “[i]n patriarchal times the fathers [were] both civil and religious leaders of their families and clans, offering sacrifice and performing other cultic functions as they wished.”<sup>44</sup> Thus, even in the broader context of the Ancient Near Eastern world, there was scarcely a concept of the division of priest and king.<sup>45</sup> This suggests that the offices were always meant to be inextricably linked.

Furthermore, within the Pentateuch, it seems as if the Aaronic priesthood was subtly criminalized and therefore set as a foil against the Melchizedekian priesthood. As the very first mention of a priest, Melchizedek was only cast in a positive light. On the other hand, the Aaronic priesthood and its establishment did not receive such high praise. A few examples act as salient: (1) the very first mention of Aaron in Exodus 4 was cast in a negative light since it was to Aaron that the task of speaking to Pharaoh was given *only after Moses responded to God in faithlessness*; (2) when God once more commissioned Moses to go to Pharaoh in Exodus 6, he again responded in faithlessness, and thus the task was transferred to Aaron a second time.<sup>46</sup> What these examples display is that Aaron and his mediatorial functions were deferred to *only in the face of faithlessness*. These

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<sup>43</sup> Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 165.

<sup>44</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 282.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Joshua G. Matthews, *Melchizedek’s Alternative Priestly Order: A Compositional Analysis of Genesis 14:18-20 and Its Echoes throughout the Tanak* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 139-40.

examples, among others, suggest a contrast between the Aaronic priesthood against “Melchizedek and the ideal priesthood that he initiates.”<sup>47</sup>

Not only is Melchizedek’s priesthood set over and against the Aaronic priesthood, but of paramount significance, Melchizedek is also connected to the prophetic, royal motif of the Pentateuch found in places like Genesis 49, Numbers 24, and Deuteronomy 32.<sup>48</sup> In each of these chapters, there is found a poem which casts the vision for a future kingly-messiah who is to come through the line of Judah. At the outset, Hebrews 7:1-3 orientates Melchizedek within the idea of a kingly-messiah: based on Melchizedek’s name and kingship, the author of Hebrews describes Melchizedek as a “king of righteousness” and a “king of peace” (Heb. 1:2). Certainly, these descriptions have messianic leanings. More significant than this, however, is that there seems to be a number of motif and textual links between the Melchizedek episode of Genesis 14 and the royal poems of the Pentateuch. To name two, the theme of blessing is present in Genesis 14:18-20, just as it is present in the royal poems. Jacob blesses in Genesis 49, Balaam blesses in Numbers 24, and Moses blesses in Deuteronomy 33. Thematic links are very important within biblical-theological study, and despite its seemingly surface-level nature, the theme of blessing does in fact connect these episodes quite strongly. Second, though not used in its full form as found in Genesis 14:18-20, the title for God as *Elyon* is only used twice in the rest of the Pentateuch, *both of which are found in the royal poems mentioned above*—Numbers 24:16 and Deuteronomy 32:8 refer to God as “Most High.”<sup>49</sup> Though the preceding discussion may not offer an absolutely definitive case, everything submitted thus far strongly suggests that Melchizedek may play a “textual role in the Pentateuch’s message of an eschatological, messianic king.”<sup>50</sup> Such a conclusion is made even more abundantly clear in Hebrews since Christ, the eschatological kingly Messiah, is shown to be the fulfillment of Melchizedek’s character.

### Conclusion

Upon consulting the entire biblical witness, it becomes evident that Melchizedek is not simply a character that can be added to the list of obscure biblical individuals. Considering not only how he is portrayed in Genesis 14, but also Hebrews 7, it is clear that as a type of Christ he reveals the presence of an alternative priestly order in the OT which merged the delegations of priest and king into one functioning office. Because Hebrews 7 in one sense teaches that the Levitical priesthood was destined for failure, and adding the Pentateuch’s own

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 139.

subtle witness against the establishment of this priesthood, it seems that God always intended for it to be a priest-king who was to fulfill the purposes for which the Levitical priesthood was appointed. As a character textually related to the royal poems of the Pentateuch, Melchizedek casts forth a vision for the one who was to fulfill the hopeful expectation of a kingly-Messiah, and this vision suggests that the fulfillment should be sought for in the vein of Melchizedek, not the Levitical priesthood. The kingly-Messiah is not one who would take on the yoke of the Levites, but instead would cast it aside revealing that such a yoke was never meant to be carried effectively. Rather, it was the offices of priest and king merged together as pictured in Melchizedek that was to actualize God's mediatorial vision. Thus, Christ as a priest-king came "[a]ccording to the order of Melchizedek" to fulfill God's vision where the Levitical priesthood failed (Ps. 110:4).

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