

A Priest Forever

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Hebrews 5:1-10

There are certain books of the Bible that I feel I have a pretty good sense of. They fit into nice categories, so that when passages from them pop up in the lectionary, I have at least a bit of context. When Hebrews came up as the epistle texts for most of October, I was a bit surprised to realize that I couldn't really identify for myself what the letter is about. Sure, I remember several key passages — chapter 11 for example, which I remember as the “Hall of Faith.” But beyond those bits, what is the context for the designated readings?

Alongside that, the author of the letter makes some odd rhetorical choices. In particular, there is a good chunk of space devoted to this guy Melchizidek. Why Melchizidek? I find it a wonderfully fun name to say, although I could not convince María of its usefulness.

With these gaps in knowledge in mind, I sat down to read the book in my hotel room in Birmingham. I recommend you try this — it is a fairly manageable size to approach in one sitting, and it is engaging.

I had along the Bible my parents gave me after my baptism — the copy that I read straight through over the course of a couple of years as a teenager. It was fascinating to see what I underlined and highlighted back then. As is true with any part of scripture, I found bits that intrigued me, bothered me, inspired me and confused me.

Contextually, the letter shares some similarities with the Gospel of Matthew. It is written to an audience that is steeped in Judaism — likely one of the early communities that was still able to consider itself part of a Christian sect within the Jewish faith. The author assumes a thorough knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures and drops quick references to Hebrew verses and passages throughout the letter.

One such reference is to this Melchizidek. It comes from Psalm 110. Keep in mind that

the intended audience would know each and every Psalm by heart — they were sung regularly and from memory in temple and synagogue worship. So in much the same way that if I asked you, “What is this place where we are meeting?” you could respond, “only a house, the earth its floor,” the original readers would, upon hearing this quotation, bring to mind an entire context from the Psalm. And that context is worth a bit of our time as well.

Most of the Psalm has a rather militant tone and looks forward to a day when God's chosen One will have victory over his enemies. It begins, “The LORD (God) says to my lord (a king): 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'” Early Christian thinkers quickly applied this Psalm to Jesus, understanding him as God's anointed one: the chosen King who would bring victory. In fact, that first verse is quoted in Matthew, Mark, Luke and Acts. But then we scroll down to verse 4 and find this thing about Melchizidek: “The LORD (God) has sworn and will not relent, 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizidek.’”

I suspect that this would have brought about an “Aha!” for the original readers of Hebrews. They had likely heard the first part of Psalm 110 applied to Jesus before — but here, the writer is skipping to a different part of the Psalm, presumably to make a different point.

The writer uses the character of Melchizidek to describe Jesus as a different type of King or Lord than one might imagine from the surrounding verses of Psalm 110. Moving forward to Hebrews chapter 7, we find an expansion on these themes. Melchizidek, who makes his brief appearance in Genesis 14, has a name which means “king of righteousness.” He is the “king of Salem,” and Salem means “Peace.” Does this reference to an obscure character from the Old Testament mean that the author is intentionally presenting a counter-tradition to other early Christian teachings? Is this reference to a Priest-King of righteousness

and peace in purposeful contrast to an emphasis on Jesus as a conquering King and Lord?

Unlike the Levitical priests, Jesus' priesthood did not depend upon being part of a particular tribe or even nation; in fact, Genesis describes Melchizedek as a “priest of God Most High” before there was any Levitical priesthood to be a part of; even before Israel was a nation. Quoting from Hebrews 7:15-16, “And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.”

Back in chapter 5 we find that “Every high priest is selected from among the people and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God...” This is a part of another broad theme in the book of Hebrews — that a priest, and even the Highest Priest, is one of the people.

The writer takes an explicitly adoptionist approach to Jesus' identity — that he became the Christ by God's decree, and that God chose him from among the people on the basis of his righteousness, which made his life “indestructible.”

It is fascinating to look at how this book names and describes Jesus. In other parts of the New Testament, it is most common to refer to God's son post-ascension as “Christ.” In fact, some modern theologians (including one of my seminary professors) go to great lengths to argue that Christ is no longer simply the person Jesus, but some cosmic reality without bodily form. One prominent hymn writer will not use gendered language for Christ except for when he is explicitly referring to the 33 years of Jesus' earthly ministry.

Not so with the writer of Hebrews! This writer uses the proper name Jesus more frequently than any other title. Jesus remains Jesus, in both heavenly and earthly form. Jesus, a human, a man, a person, a body with a gender, was and is the Christ and is at one with God. Again, this emphasis stands in contrast to some other New Testament writings in

which the divinity of Christ is paramount.

In chapter 2:14-15, we read “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil — and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” And in verse 17 and 18, “For this reason he had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

For Jesus to be Christ, the great high priest in the order of Melchizedek, the king of righteousness and peace, he had to be human. Fully human. He had to be a body-spirit creature who lived according to God's design. He had to experience everything that humans go through. And because he lived the indestructible life, when death claimed him death itself was destroyed. The resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate vindication of the goodness of the body — and the ascension reveals to us the permanent union of the things of earth with the things of heaven.

Because Jesus was and is and will be forever our great high priest, we need no other sacrifice and no other intercessor. We need not fear the taste of death, and we can know that our lives and our beings can be eternal things. In Jesus humanity is joined forever to Divinity — and this is our destination as well.