

# HEBREWS STUDY 3

4:14-7:28



## Jesus Christ is Greater than the Highest Religious Leaders

It has to be said that this is a challenging passage. As 5:11 (*About this we have much to say that is hard to explain*) states, the author looks as if he is writing a disclaimer, as this part of his 'sermon' is somewhat complex. The mysterious figure of Melchizedek is introduced. This is the only place he is mentioned in the New Testament.

### The Argument about Melchizedek

Jesus is the high priest because he comes from the line of Melchizedek.

The reason it is difficult for us to understand is because of the imagery used which is unfamiliar to us today. Basically, the argument is that if a connection can be found between Jesus and an Old Testament person, such as Melchizedek, you have demonstrated the truth about Jesus being the Messiah.

The author's logic goes like this:

A1. The Jewish High Priest offered animal sacrifices on the Day of Atonement for the forgiveness of sins (5:1-4).

**B1. Jesus is a high priest too, but not through a historical lineage (7:13-17). Since he comes through the eternal order of Melchizedek, he is a superior high priest, who offers himself as sacrifice (5:5-6).**

A2. Since the high priest was human in every respect, he was subject to all weaknesses (sin 5:2) and even had to offer sacrifices for himself.

**B2. Jesus suffered as we do and was tempted as we are (5:7-9) but without sin (7:27). Therefore, he is a better high priest, one who is holy, blameless, and undefiled (7:26).**

A3. The priesthood of the people came through Levi and Aaron through the Levitical line. (According to Deut. 10:8, the Levites were the ones set apart to carry the Ark of the Covenant and organise the worship as the priests of the people.).

**B3. Jesus came through Melchizedek, and since Melchizedek was superior to Aaron, Jesus is better (5:4; 7:11-14).**

A4. High priests get their authority through physical descent and legal succession, but since they all die, there are many of them throughout history (7:16, 23).

**B4. Jesus has been called through an eternal priesthood, and since God raised him from the dead, he is eternally superior, 'a priest for ever' (5:6; 6:20; 7:3, 16, 24-25), and his sacrifice once and for all (7:27) and perfect (7:28).**

### Background of Melchizedek

Melchizedek was a key figure in Jewish and Christian expectations about the future, so readers in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century would have been familiar with his speculations about his importance in God's plans for the coming age.

The Jewish historian Josephus emphasises Melchizedek's priestly role, his relationship with Abraham, and his connection with Jerusalem.

Philo, a Jewish Theologian, develops Melchizedek's place as the high priest of God - emphasising his righteousness and that his thoughts about God were high, vast and sublime.

*So, we can see the imagery that the author of Hebrews was drawing on.*

In the Old Testament Melchizedek is mentioned only in Gen. 14:17-24, and Ps. 110:4.

The Genesis account demonstrates, according to the author of Hebrews, that since Abraham, the founder of the Hebrew nation, paid a tribute (tithe) to Melchizedek (7:4-6), and needed to be blessed by him (7:6), then Melchizedek obviously outranks him. The inferior is blessed by the superior (7:7).

Melchizedek can be seen to be superior to Levi, because Levi descended from Abraham (7:10). He was already in Abraham's DNA.

In chapter 7, the author places special emphasis on the mysterious background of Melchizedek in order to highlight the distance between the high priests (Levites) and Jesus as the true high priest.

(7:1) Melchizedek = king of righteousness. Salem = peace. Even the names used to describe the “King” indicate the importance given to him by God.

There is no background information about Melchizedek in the Old Testament. The author of Hebrews thus attributes to him an origin that takes on a kind of superhuman and eternal status - *“without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days no ending of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.”* (7:3)

In his argument the author quotes from Psalm 110:4 - one which he uses to refer to Jesus – *‘You are a priest forever . . .’*

For those who were the original hearers, especially Jewish converts, Hebrews would have been good news.

### **The Humanity of Jesus**

Emphasis is placed on Jesus’ elevated status as eternal high priest. It is this that gives us the hope that the sacrifice of his death has secured God’s promise of forgiveness for all time.

However, 4:15 states that Jesus is able to sympathise with our sinfulness (weakness), having been tested in every way as we are. Jesus understands the trials that believers face - yet without sin.

5:7 - as a human being (days of his flesh) Jesus agonised over what he would face on the cross. A reference to the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt. 26:36-56) recalls his grief and prayer to God. This reminds us of the suffering we must sometimes face because of our faith - like JC we should be determined to do God’s will no matter what the consequences are.

4:16 reminds us that we have one who has gone before who can help in our time of need.

### **Some Tough Pastoral Advise (5:11-14; 6:1-12)**

It would seem that one of the issues being addressed in Hebrews is that some have given way to temptation and are in danger of losing their faith, as they don’t seem to be making any progress in essential Christian learning. They

have become *dull in understanding* (5:11). They may have been members for a long time, and could even be teachers themselves, but they are in desperate need of someone to teach them the basic elements of faith - (5:12) indicates they should be on substantial and not baby food.

Chapter 6 warns the readers of the consequences of not advancing to maturity. They should not continue to debate aspects of faith that he considers elementary, such as the basic issue of repentance (Am I saved?), concepts of baptism, arguing about the resurrection of the dead, and the nature of final judgment as if they were still in a membership class.

Instead, they should be worrying about the possibility of their faith becoming so distorted that it cannot be restored. (6:4-6) The unbelief being described here is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit - the unforgivable sin (Mk 3:28-30). This is not an accidental or inadvertent rebellion against God, but a conscious, deliberate, rejection of God’s love that refuses and chooses to reject God’s forgiveness in Christ and, in a sense, crucifies him over and over again (6:6).

In this distortion of the truth, God is no longer able to penetrate the defensive ramparts that recalcitrant sin builds. It is a fearful thing to spurn the Son of God and, as it were, outrage the Spirit of grace.

Fortunately, the first readers of Hebrews hadn’t fallen that far (6:9-12) and the author qualifies this as he refers to their genuine work and spiritual productivity. They’re reminded of the full assurance of hope until the end (6:1) - an anchor in the midst of storms (6:19), a better covenant through which we can always approach God (7:18-19).

Unlike the sacrifices of the priests, Jesus’ sacrifice does not need to be repeated - it is ***once for all*** and brings forgiveness for ever. (7:27)

