



Russian Icon of Christ  
as High Priest

## Week 2: From Melchizedek to Jesus, the Great High Priest

*(Hebrews 4.14-16; 5.1-10)*

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### Bible Reading

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness, and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not presume to take this honour but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was. So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest but was appointed by the one who said to him,

“You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you”;

as he says also in another place,  
“You are a priest forever,  
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered, and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

## Reflection

**Melchizedek.** A name mentioned two times in the Old Testament, only found in Hebrews in the New Testament, and immortalised across hymns and worship songs. But who is this mysterious figure and why does he matter? Most obviously, as we reflect on the 'types' of Christ (i.e., those Old Testament persons and prophecies fulfilled in him), the occurrences of Melchizedek in the New Testament are intimately connected with Jesus. Twice in only a few verses of Hebrews 5 – the only book in the New Testament to call Jesus a high priest – Jesus is described as 'A high priest according to the order of Melchizedek' (5.6, quoting Psalm 110; and 5.10). Melchizedek, a king and priest, is the fundamental key for how the author of Hebrews proclaims Jesus as...king and priest.

And because of this link, the author of Hebrews can make further significant claims about who Jesus is. Jesus as high priest was appointed by God, atones for sins, deals 'gently with the ignorant and wayward', 'offered up prayers and supplications', suffered, and ultimately 'became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him' (5.1-10). Hebrews bases these claims firmly on the connection between Jesus and Melchizedek.

But why? Why does the author of Hebrews need Melchizedek's priestly order to make these claims about Jesus? If we take a step back, we find that in ancient Jewish tradition, the high priest appointed by God had a very significant role. He was a person who stood before God with the people on his heart, offered sacrifices to God in the Temple for the atonement of sins, and was the only one who could enter the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary in the Temple, where God's presence was made manifest. And key for understanding Hebrews, high priests were always chosen from the same Jewish tribe: the tribe of Levi (Numbers 17-18).

But of course, this is where calling Jesus a high priest gets tricky, because Jesus is not from the tribe of Levi! As we find across the gospels, Hebrews, and the Book of Revelation, Jesus is from the tribe of Judah (see Matthew 1.2; Luke 3.22; Hebrews 7.14; Revelation 5.5). And thus, because Jesus is from the tribe of Judah and not Levi, he cannot be a high priest. It would seem that 'High priest' must be an incorrect title for Jesus.

This, however, is where the author of Hebrews is immensely clever, and this is where Melchizedek enters the picture, because Melchizedek was a priest. According to Genesis 14 he is king of Salem and 'priest of the most high God' and, significantly, he is not a Levite. Why? Because Melchizedek is a priest before Levi was born. He is a priest before the first High Priest Aaron was born. In fact, Melchizedek was the high priest for Levi's great-grandfather and Aaron's great-great-great grandfather, Abraham. As we find in Hebrews, Levi 'was still in the loins of his ancestor' when Melchizedek met Abraham (7.9-10). For Genesis tells us that Melchizedek knew Abraham, offered him bread and wine and blessed him after a battle, and in return Abraham offers a tithe of all his possessions to Melchizedek (Genesis 14.18-20).

So Melchizedek isn't just a great high priest, he is Abraham's priest to whom Abraham – Abram at the time – makes an offering. And thus he isn't only a model high priest, the priest before all high priests, his is also the one who we are told in Psalm 110 – one of the most quoted psalms in the New Testament – will be the order that the messiah will be from. For the messianic figure in Psalm 110 isn't simply a king but is a king and a priest in the order of Melchizedek.

According to Hebrews then, Melchizedek tells us a lot about who Jesus is. As described in Genesis and the Psalms, Melchizedek is the first and therefore greatest of priests, he is eternal having 'no father or mother' (Hebrews 7.3) – he is given no genealogy in Genesis. Moreover, he blesses Abraham rather than descends from him, and it is in this line, in this order of priests, that Jesus is high priest. For Jesus too is a priest forever (7.17). Jesus too is a superior high priest not through the descendants of Levi (7.11). And all of this is because Jesus is in the order of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek therefore offers both the way around the Levitical requirement for high priests in Jesus' time, and the way for Hebrews to place Jesus in a different kind of priestly order, one that pre-dates the Levites, one that ministers even to Abraham, one that the great Jewish patriarch recognises as significant. Melchizedek is the reason Jesus can be called high priest. At the same time, like any type, their high priesthoods are different. For unlike the Levitical High Priest, Jesus doesn't make continual sacrifices in a temple. Instead, Jesus made one sacrifice on the cross that atones for sin once and for all. He is the high priest in the heavenly temple, rather than the earthly one.

Of course we have to be careful with a simplistic replacement theology, which would argue that Jesus replaced ancient Jewish tradition or superseded it. Hebrews can easily be read as arguing that. But as we see here in Hebrews, the understanding of Jesus as high priest relies on Jewish texts, ancient Jewish traditions, and ancient Jewish understandings of sacrifice and atonement. And because Jesus is in the line of Melchizedek, he has, according to the author of Hebrews, every right to be called high priest.

So while Melchizedek only plays a small role in Old Testament texts as a mysterious figure mentioned only in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110, he takes on a significant role in Hebrews (chapter 5 and 7) as his presence secures and defends the title of High Priest for Jesus. Thanks to Melchizedek's priestly ministry to Abraham, we better understand how it is that we sing to Jesus, our great high priest, who is both priest and victim, in the eucharistic feast.

## Questions

- What does the coming of Jesus teach us about the meaning of priesthood?
- According to Hebrews, what is characteristic of Jesus as our great High Priest?
- What share do all Christians – not only the ordained – have in the priesthood of Christ?
- In the icon shown above, Jesus is robed as a bishop/high priest: does this help or hinder your understanding of his priesthood?

## Hymn

### We Hail Thy Presence Glorious

*(Richard Godfrey Parsons)*

We hail thy Presence glorious,  
O Christ our great high Priest,  
O'er sin and death victorious,  
At thy thanksgiving feast:  
As thou art interceding  
For us in heaven above,  
Thy Church on earth is pleading  
Thy perfect work of love.

Through thee in every nation  
Thine own their hearts upraise,  
Offering one pure Oblation,  
One Sacrifice of praise:  
With thee in blest communion  
The living and the dead  
Are joined in closest union,  
One Body with one Head.

O living Bread from heaven,  
Jesu, our Saviour good,  
Who thine own self hast given  
To be our souls' true food;  
For us thy body broken  
Hung on the Cross of shame:  
This Bread its hallowed token  
We break in thy dear name.

O stream of love unending,  
Poured from the one true Vine,  
With our weak nature blending  
The strength of life divine;  
Our thankful faith confessing  
In thy life-blood outpoured,  
We drink this Cup of blessing  
And praise thy name, O Lord.

May we thy word believing  
Thee through thy gifts receive,  
That, thou within us living,  
We all to God may live;  
Draw us from earth to heaven  
Till sin and sorrow cease,  
Forgiving and forgiven,  
In love and joy and peace

Hymn Details: [https://hymnary.org/text/we\\_hail\\_thy\\_presence\\_glorious](https://hymnary.org/text/we_hail_thy_presence_glorious)  
There are many recordings of this hymn available online.

## Prayer

Almighty God, you sent your only Son  
as the one true Mediator between God and humankind.  
Faithful to your will he offered himself,  
once and for all, on the altar of the cross,  
as a saving sacrifice for sin and so fulfilled all other offerings.  
By the power of your Holy Spirit  
may our bread and wine, like that offered by your priest  
Melchizedek,  
become a sacrifice of thanksgiving,  
and may the blessing of Abraham extend throughout the earth.  
Make us a people who proclaim with joy that you have called us out of darkness  
into your own wonderful light;  
through Jesus, our great High Priest.  
**Amen.**