

# “According to the Order of Melchizedek”: Hebrews 7 and the Priesthood of Christ

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## Introduction

Josipovici suggests that the Emmaus Road narrative (Luke 24:13-35) ‘could be a parable about interpretation’.<sup>1</sup> What is told there as the story of a literal and metaphorical journey (from the confusion of events and interpretation of these events; through the explication of events via the expounding of Scripture; to final illumination which makes sense of all that has gone before) is presented as theological reflection in the Letter to the Hebrews, and more systematically than in any other NT writing. In Hebrews, reflections on the person and role of Jesus journey through scripture from creation to the eschaton. The depictions of Jesus are carried through the metaphors of Son, high priest, and pioneer. Because of this conscious reflection on Jesus as high priest, and because of a certainly synchronicity of thought between this text and the ‘Emmaus Road’ narrative presented to the Dialogue in 2007, this study will explore the priesthood of Christ through the lens of the Letter to the Hebrews.

Many NT scholars have studied Hebrews from the point of view of its relationship to, or differences from, other writings of its period.<sup>2</sup> As an OT scholar, I find myself reading Hebrews irresistibly from the point of view of Hebrew poetics, and this is the method that I bring to this study. In typical Hebrew rhetorical mode, Hebrews opens with a summary of themes that will be explored fully throughout the rest of the text; these beginning verses tell us how to read what is to come (“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors...but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...”). The end of the letter summarises, not only the argument (Jesus as ‘pioneer and perfecter of faith’, 12:3), but the consequences of the argument for human action, in a series of ‘Therefore’ statements. The heart of the argument is placed in the centre of its structure: chapter 7. This central chapter will be the main focus of discussion in this paper, as it illuminates the surrounding themes and images.

First, some brief introductory remarks to place Hebrews in context. Authorship and specific context are unknown; early tradition placed it with the Pauline epistles, though early church Fathers questioned Pauline authorship (Origen: ‘But who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows’).<sup>3</sup> Its dating is no more exact, with a generally agreed range of approximately 60-

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<sup>1</sup> G. Josipovici, *The Book of God*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1988, p. 260.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God*. Trans. Roy A. Harrisville & Irving L. Sandberg. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984, a classic discussion of Hebrews against a Gnostic background.

<sup>3</sup> Quote from Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 6.25.14, in Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews. Hermeneia*; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989, p. 1. Note that the KJV clearly attributes Pauline authorship, but acknowledges by a note at the end: ‘Written to the Hebrews from Italy by Timothy’.

100CE.<sup>4</sup> The addressees are equally unclear ('Hebrews' being assigned as designation on the basis of content), but some assumptions can be made. It is clearly intended to be read by Christians, who are being exhorted and encouraged, and have possibly suffered persecution (10:33), hostility (12:3), torture (13:3), public ridicule and abuse (10:33). The use of the epistle by Clement of Rome, similarities to 1 Peter, and use of both Greek and Hebrew rhetorical strategies make it highly likely that it is addressed to Jewish Christians in a Greco-Roman setting (possibly Rome) who need educating in their Christology, which has possibly become unbalanced between the divinity and humanity of Christ. The many enigmas of Hebrews (genre, writing style, etc) will not be addressed here.

## **1. In The Beginning: Jesus as Son**

Before concentrating on chapter 7, Hebrew poetics demand that we attend to the opening of the writing, to gather up pointers to where the journey will lead:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. (1:1-4; *NRSV*)

From this opening, we may expect the following themes to unfold: the story of God's journey with humankind has been reflected in the Scriptures from the very beginning, through patriarchs, Moses, and prophets. However, before and through all God's history with creation, is the presence of the Son, now manifested to us clearly as both inheritor of all things and sustainer of all things, and in his person clearly manifesting God's presence and glory. Jesus, through entering into human time, space and experience, now completes the journey into divine time, space and experience. His entry into the divine realm is consequent to his action in making purification for sins (traditionally a priestly role), and indicates a journey: from before the beginning of creation, through human life (with its propensity for sin), to divine majesty in perpetual glory.

From these briefly stated themes, Hebrews leads the reader on a road that travels in conversation with the Scriptures, using them to explain, interpret and illustrate. Part of the necessity for this journey lies in the firm belief that Jesus himself undertook the journey, by becoming one of the seed of Abraham, flesh and blood like us, experiencing death as we do, being tested as we are (2:14-18), so that by fully undergoing the human journey, he might also redeem humanity. While chapters 1-6 travel the road of Abraham and Moses, holding fast to the patriarchal promise as well as wandering with the rebellious Israelites in the desert, chapter 7 focuses on a particular moment from that journey, using this moment as a lens

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<sup>4</sup> For a full discussion of possible dating according to the dating of 1 Clement, which appears to cite Hebrews, see Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 6-9.

through which to understand the whole journey of the Son, from creation to eschaton. The lens helps us see clearly why the Son is ‘...as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs’.

## 2. ‘This King Melchizedek of Salem’

Leading up to chapter 7, Melchizedek has already been mentioned three times (5:6, 10; 6:20), each time in the context of Jesus’ designation by God as ‘a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek’. Chapter 5 provides a midrash on Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:4 to link the ideas of divine appointment and divine adoption. Jesus has not arbitrarily taken over the role of high priest through some sense of self-aggrandisement; on the contrary, his appointment is by God, and is to both Sonship and priesthood. NT uses of Ps 2:7 tend to relate to the resurrection. It is at the resurrection that Christ is understood to become ‘Son of God’, receiving universal and eternal royal dominion.<sup>5</sup> At the end of chapter 6, the purpose of adoption and appointment is stated clearly: so that Jesus could go ahead of us into the most holy space (‘the inner shrine behind the curtain’), taking with him our ‘hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul’ (6:19). How such a thing can possibly be – human mortality somehow being able to hope for an end to the journey in divine immortality – becomes the focus of chapter 7.<sup>6</sup>

Chapter 7 contains five references to Melchizedek. In Hebrew poetics, such a preponderance of repetition creates a pause; the reader is forced to slow down and reflect, to allow the repetitions to chart the journey through the argument, and then to circle back to the beginning to reflect on the insights that have been gained through the journey. In summary, the journey of the name goes like this:

- v. 1: King Melchizedek of Salem (the original story and its relevant themes)
- v. 10: Melchizedek as prior to Levi in time, and superior in station
- v. 11: Melchizedek as an order other than Levite, therefore unlike the Levite order not characterised by mortal imperfection
- v. 15: Melchizedek as prototype for ‘another priest’ who is a priest not through descent but through indestructible life
- v. 17: Melchizedek as sign of a better hope, attested to by Ps 110:4

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<sup>5</sup> Cf Rom 1:4 for a statement relating resurrection to adoption.

<sup>6</sup> This paper will not address comparisons between the treatment of Melchizedek in Hebrews & in extra-biblical writings. See, for example, Attridge, *Hebrews*, pp. 192ff; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “‘Now this Melchizedek...’ (Heb 7, 1)”, *CBQ* 25 (1963) 305-321, for full discussions of comparisons between Heb 7 and 4Q *Florilegium*, Jubilees, and the Qumran midrash *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, as well as Josephus, Philo and the Rabbis. Fitzmyer also examines the MT, 1QapGen, and Neofiti I on Gen 14, to discover how the midrash on Melchizedek has developed.

Note that this idea is developed, becoming also the sign of a better covenant (v. 22), via the repetition of Ps 110:4a in v. 21.

### 2.1 King Melchizedek of Salem

Firstly, the story from Gen 14:17-20 is sketched, with a brief introduction of themes that will be expanded throughout the chapter:

This "King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him"; and to him Abraham apportioned "one-tenth of everything." His name, in the first place, means "king of righteousness"; next he is also king of Salem, that is, "king of peace." Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. (7:1-3)

In Gen 14, King Melchizedek of Salem meets Abram as Abram returns in triumph, with other allied kings, from the defeat of King Chedorlaomer of Elam and the rescue of Lot and other captives. Melchizedek, described as 'priest of El Elyon' (usually translated as 'God Most High'), greets Abram with a gift of bread and wine, and blesses him.<sup>7</sup> Abram then gives Melchizedek 'one tenth of everything'. The story is enigmatic and sparse, a strange, unlikely episode in the middle of a typical battle report. It is generally understood to be an interpolation that introduces priestly and cultic themes anachronistically into a narrative of the patriarchal period.<sup>8</sup> However, the blessing of Abram by Melchizedek, in the name of El Elyon, does set the literary and thematic scene for the ensuing covenant-making ceremony between God and Abram (chapt. 15). This brief interchange also focuses the idea of 'blessing' (*brk*) which is integral to the Abraham narrative. Gen 12:2-3 begins Abraham's journey with a promise of blessing that will not only fall on Abraham, but through him, on 'those who bless you' and ultimately on 'all the families of the earth' (echoed in chapt. 27, when the blessing is passed down from Isaac to Jacob). Melchizedek's blessing is twofold and two-way: firstly, from 'God most high' upon Abram, then upon 'God most high', for Abram's victory.

It has been suggested that the gifts of bread and wine are signs of the promised gift of land: affirmations to the nomadic Abram that God's original promises would eventuate, anticipating the more obvious sign and affirmation that will follow in the cutting of the covenant. The gifts of bread and wine are not part of Hebrews' re-telling of this story. The main points here are not concerned with the promise to Abraham, but rather with

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<sup>7</sup> *El Elyon* is widely regarded as a name for the Canaanite chief god, gradually associated with the Israelite YHWH. The fact that Melchizedek comes from Salem, a Canaanite city, suggests that he is a priest of a Canaanite god. However, the text works against this interpretation by putting the same title in the mouth of Abram in v. 22, in parallel with the name that called Abram from his country in Gen 12:1: 'I have sworn to YHWH El Elyon, maker of heaven and earth...'

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the discussion in Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*. (Trans. John J. Scullion S.J.) Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985, p.203f.

the action of Melchizedek (blessing) and the being of Melchizedek ('without genealogy... *resembling the Son of God*'). However, even though there is no explicit mention of the gift-giving, this is a theme that hovers in the background in Hebrews: the unexpected gift, graciously bestowed by one who comes with no prior obligations, as seal of a promised home-coming.

Hebrews 7 begins by expanding on the name and title: 'Melchizedek' ('king of righteousness') and 'king of Salem' ('king of peace'). The terms righteousness and peace are not explicitly developed in the following argument, but provide a firm foundation. They are a midrash on prophetic promises of a future ruler (Isa 9:7; Mal 4:2). Melchizedek will not only prove to be a prototype for Jesus as priest, but also as the ideal Ruler. The resemblance to Jesus ('Son of God') is summarised in his eternal nature: 'having neither beginning of days nor end of life'. The climax, 'a priest forever', is enhanced by form, as the preceding cadences flow with hymnic rhythms (whether or not they arise from an actual early Christian hymn, which is subject to dispute).

## *2.2 The priority of Melchizedek*

This part of the argument picks up Abraham's response to Melchizedek (giving him a tithe from the spoils of war) and uses it to make two important points. First, if Melchizedek can collect a tithe from Abraham, he is obviously greater than Abraham. If we have any doubt about that, the fact that he blessed Abraham proves to be the clincher: 'It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior' (v. 7). This statement has little basis in fact, but works well rhetorically.

Second, the superiority of Melchizedek over the order of Levites is demonstrated. They have been commanded to collect tithes from their 'kindred' (Num 18: 21-32), even though their common descent from Abraham presumably confers equal status between those who give and those who receive. However, Melchizedek, with no Levite obligation to call in tithes, nevertheless receives them from Abraham himself, ancestor of those who both give and receive. Melchizedek is shown as the ultimate receiver of tithes, through the as yet unrealised potential of Abraham. Melchizedek's superiority over Levi is further developed by pointing out the superiority of one who 'lives' over those who are mortal. Melchizedek's priority is both temporal and in status.

## *2.3 The non-Levite priesthood of Melchizedek*

'Now' (v. 11), we reach the heart and purpose of the Melchizedek journey. What has gone before sets the basis for what will come, and will be developed in the succeeding chapters. The crux is the inadequacy of the old system of priesthood, in contrast with

the new-order priest. This is such a momentous movement that careful examination of law and tradition is needed. The question concerning the law lies in its efficacy to attain perfection for the people. Tradition raises the question of who has the right to act as priest. Both of these questions require a brief discussion on the nature and purpose of priesthood in the OT.

It is very difficult to trace a clear picture of the historical origins and activities of priests and priesthood in the OT. There appears to be only one common thread in the rather confused traditions, namely Levite genealogical connection. This connection is associated with all characters appearing in a priestly role.<sup>9</sup> The picture of who could perform sacrifice is confused; there are many stories of non-Levites performing sacrifices, although there is possibly a differentiation between performing these at an altar and at a temple structure.<sup>10</sup> However, especially before Josiah's centralising reform, the traditions are muddy. Scholer suggests that the single characteristic feature of a priest was holiness (*badal*; LXX *diastellein*, to 'separate', 'set apart for God'). This was required because of the holiness of God. The priest was able to gain access to the most sacred domain and the most holy objects on which God's presence (*shekinah*) rested. A key role of the priest was monitoring and protecting sacred space, which spread out from the holy of holies in concentric circles of decreasing holiness through the various spheres of the tabernacle / temple. The levels of holiness required corresponding levels of holiness in the priest, or other persons entering those spheres. Only the priest, following intense purification, could approach the sanctuary and altar and bring blood into contact with the altar.

The main function of the priest, then, was mediatory. Divine space and human space corresponded in the sanctuary, not in a metaphorical sense, but in the sense that the holiness of God and God's realm could touch and overlay the human realm.<sup>11</sup> The culmination of the priestly role was the Day of Atonement, on which the priest purged the sanctuary of the accumulated sin of the people (Lev 16), a necessary prerequisite to God's continuing holy presence.<sup>12</sup> Exactly who performed this function is unclear. The term 'high priest' (*hakkohen haggadol*) is a late expression; usually the priest is simply

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<sup>9</sup> Eg. Moses: Exod 2:1; 6:19-25; Aaron: Exod 4:14; 6:19-25; Samuel: 1 Chron 6:7-13, 18-23, 33-38; Eli: 1 Sam 1:3; 2:27; 4:4, 11, 17; Zadok: 1 Chron 24:3). Note that those lacking a Levite genealogy in the Deuteronomistic History are provided with one in Chronicles.

<sup>10</sup> For a full discussion on priesthood in the OT, see John M. Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews*. JSNTSupp 49; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991, p. 14f.

<sup>11</sup> Ina Willi-Plein, "Some remarks on Hebrews from the viewpoint of Old Testament exegesis", in *Hebrews: Contemporary Methods – New Insights*, ed. Gabriella Gelardini, Leiden: Brill, 2005, p. 29, describes this overlap as 'real presence'.

<sup>12</sup> See J. Milgrom, "Atonement in the OT", *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1976, pp. 82-83.

called 'the priest', or 'the anointed priest'.<sup>13</sup> The narrative of Lev 16 shows Aaron in the role of atoning priest, attending to his own purity first through a very careful set of ritual actions.<sup>14</sup> His access to God, in the holy of holies, depends on this prior purification. He then enters into the presence of God to incense the mercy seat, and to manipulate the blood: sprinkling the blood of a bull for his own sins and the blood of a goat for the sins of the people.<sup>15</sup>

Given that the one unifying factor for OT priests was the Levite connection, this needs to be explained when 'another priest' arises, who does not belong to the 'order of Aaron' (ie, Levi). Unlike Melchizedek, Jesus is not lacking genealogy; he just has the wrong genealogy for priesthood, according to OT law.<sup>16</sup> Hence, argues Hebrews, it is time for a change of law. The reason for this is simple: the old law, and the system prevailing under it, was ineffectual. This will be developed further later in this chapter. For the moment, it is simply stated that perfection could not be attained through the levitical priesthood. Failure of efficacy necessitates a change of priesthood. If a change of priesthood necessitates a change of law, the legal requirement for priesthood obviously needs to change. This takes us to the next reference to Melchizedek.

#### *2.4 Melchizedek as prototype for 'another priest'*

Physical descent, the requirement up till now for priesthood, is inadequate. If the previous law could make nothing perfect, the new law must be based on a quite different requirement: 'the power of an indestructible life' (v. 16). This has been made obvious by the arising of 'another priest', resembling Melchizedek. In the earlier references to Ps 110:4, Jesus' relationship to Melchizedek has been described as *taxis: kata ten taxin Melchizedek*; however, *taxis* has not been explicated. Now, in 7:15, the paraphrase *kata ten homoioteta Melchizedek* makes the meaning clear: Jesus is a priest 'in the same way' as Melchizedek. Up to this stage, the Melchizedek references have presented us with a round picture of one who is king of righteousness and peace, without genealogy (specifically Levite), eternal in his priesthood, conveyer of blessing. This is the rich resemblance, the 'same way', that we are invited to contemplate as we

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the differences between Exod 29:1-9, and Exod 28:41, as to exactly who is anointed. The term 'high priest', in Zechariah, takes on a representational role (Zech 3:2; 6:13), and gradually comes to appropriate the role of the king.

<sup>14</sup> The laws concerning the holiness of priests refer to impurity, marriage (Lev 21:10-15), installation (Exod 29:4; Lev 8:6, 16:4) and clothing (Exod 28; 39).

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that the point of blood sacrifice was precisely the manipulation of the blood, not the actual death of the sacrificial victim. See, for example, Walter Edward Brooks, "The Perpetuity of Christ's Sacrifice in the Epistle to the Hebrews", *JBL* 89 (1970) 205-214.

<sup>16</sup> But the right genealogy for fulfilling messianic prophecies, as evidenced by the choice of the verb *anatetalken*, 'sprung', to describe the descent of 'our Lord' from Judah. Cf 'branch' and 'star' metaphors of Isa 11:1; Jer 23:5; Zech 6:12; Mal 4:2.

continue to explore what this new priest brings, through the power of his indestructible life.

### *2.5 Melchizedek as a sign of 'better' hope*

The ineffectual nature of the earlier commandment is re-stated. This time, it is not simply seen as time for change, but for abrogation (*athetesis*, which will appear again in 9:26 for the removal of sin). The previous law simply could not provide perfection (repeating v. 11), therefore could not provide hope of approach to God (the main function of priesthood). Now, however, there is a 'better' hope. Melchizedek's priesthood stands as a sign of the ultimate function of a priest: approach to God, into the holy of holies. The mention of 'hope' sends us back to the end of chapt. 6:

'We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, as entered, having become a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.' (6:19-20)

Now this hope is made clear; the 'order of Melchizedek' provides a priest who is eternal, who has 'the power of an indestructible life'. As the chapter continues, the basis for this hope is further spelled out, in contrast with the old order that was limited by its mortality.

Jesus' unique role as priest lies in his ability to live eternally in the divine presence, and therefore to mediate eternally for humanity. Human priests were confined by death, and also by their own sinfulness. The writer presents a picture of ceaseless motion, of the human priests ceaselessly attempting to atone for their own sins, let alone for the sins of the people. Moreover, we see these priests aging, wearing out, dying, still uselessly attempting to offer enough sacrifices to allow an approach to God. In contrast, Jesus' action was once only, eternally effective. His life is eternal intercession, eternal approach to God. His perfection is absolute, as is evidenced in the repetitions of v. 26: 'holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens'. His priesthood is not comparable with human priesthood (v. 27: 'unlike the other high priests'), as his sphere of action is unlike the human sphere (a theme that will be developed in chapt. 8). Therefore he is 'the guarantee of a better covenant' (v. 22), which is the direct approach to God through this perfect mediator.

The reference to the 'better covenant' becomes the springboard that launches us forward into the rest of the letter. Chapt. 8 expands the 'covenant' theme through conversation with Jeremiah 31, which states that this 'new covenant' will be immediate, apprehended by all (*yada*, 'to know', having rich connotations of



intellectual, emotional, spiritual and physical intimacy). It will not be based on arcane teachings or on intellectual or social status. Rather, it will be based on the action of God, through mercy and forgiveness. Now, declares Hebrews, we have the mediator of this covenant, and the 'shadow' (10:1) has been replaced by the reality.

### **3. 'Therefore...': the Consequences of the Journey**

Melchizedek has led us through an intense journey, from 'beginning of days' to 'end of life', into the life of Jesus' eternal priesthood. Through Melchizedek we have seen Jesus' priesthood as messianic in righteousness and peace; as eternal; as effective in attaining perfection; as once and for all; as continuing forever in mediating our approach to God. This is the new covenant in which the Christian community lives; and the journey continues, pioneered by Christ. Hebrews points the way forward for the community of the new covenant through a series of 'therefore' sayings (10:19; 12:1, 12, 28). These are all based on the rich picture drawn by chapt. 7, which lays the foundation for the 'confidence' with which we are urged to 'enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)' (10:19-20). On the basis of this confidence, Christ's priesthood gives us assurance of faith, cleanses our consciences, and washes our bodies clean. We consider how to 'provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together...but encouraging one another' (10:24-25). The eternally effective sacrifice made by Christ to purify from sin cannot be violated now without outraging the 'Spirit of grace' (10:29).

Therefore, because of the efficacy of Christ's priesthood, and Jesus' leading example ('pioneer and perfecter of our faith'), the Christian community is urged to endure trials (12:7) and to take them as discipline and training; to lift drooping hands and strengthen weak knees (12:12); to 'pursue peace with everyone' (12:14). Finally, based on the unshakeability of the kingdom we have received, we are urged to give thanks to God (12:28). The blessing of Melchizedek has returned full circle: not only is Abraham / the Christian community blessed in the name of God Most High, but God Most High is blessed by the community's offering of acceptable worship.

### **4. Conclusion**

A careful reading of Hebrews 7 provides a lens for understanding the rest of the letter. Christ's priesthood, its efficacy and our response, is the main theme of the letter, and this is expounded carefully in chapt. 7, via the vehicle of Melchizedek. In the form of true Hebrew poetics, repetitions of references to Melchizedek lead the reader on a hermeneutical journey. However, also in good Hebrew form, what is left unsaid

explicitly also colours the reading and understanding and makes the possibilities for interpretation even richer.<sup>17</sup>

Reading what is stated explicitly, by the end of the journey there is a clear picture of Jesus as high priest: messianic king of righteousness and peace, perfect mediator and atoner of sin, eternal intercessor, guarantee of the new covenant, through whom we are able to approach the holiness of God and live lives worthy of God's presence. Added to this picture are the unstated colours of Melchizedek's story, and these are also important in understanding Jesus' 'more excellent ministry' (8:6). Melchizedek stands for the 'other': noted precisely for his lack of genealogy (stated), but also for his lack of racial, even religious, affiliations (unstated). In both kingship and priesthood, Melchizedek presents subversive prototypes. As a king, he meets an invading army by 'coming out' from his own city with gifts: an unexpected act that conveys both promise and blessing. While Hebrews makes no use of the reference to bread and wine as eucharistic forerunners, other writers did so (including the Catholic mass, in a prayer that calls on God to 'look with favour upon these offerings and accept them as once you accepted ... the bread and wine offered by your priest Melchizedek').<sup>18</sup> These gifts prepare us for the unexpected gift of Jesus' own life, as the Son through whom God created the worlds, coming out of his divine realm, learning obedience through suffering, and living 'in every respect' (4:15) as we live, but without sin. Hence Jesus is seen to be the messianic king of righteousness and peace, a subversive figure 'resembling Melchizedek'.

As priest, Melchizedek offered a blessing to Abram and received tithes from him. There is no mention of any other priestly function: just the giving of blessing, and the receiving of gifts. Melchizedek's lack of human qualifications for priesthood make him fundamentally subversive of all human claims for 'right' priesthood. This one, this Stranger, above all others with more acceptable qualifications, is chosen as the prototype of the divine high priest. Hence we are forever pointed beyond human possibilities for mediation, purification, sanctification, or whatever else we may imagine lies in the function of priesthood. Only one who holds the one qualification absolutely unavailable to humankind – indestructible life – can possibly fulfil perfect priesthood. Therefore Jesus, like Melchizedek, subverts all priestly functions, by being the guarantee of the new covenant, the one who allows all to approach God despite caste, race, or knowledge. As 'pioneer and perfecter of our faith', this high priest has no need for sacrifice, but is active in continued blessing. Sacrifice was made once for all;

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<sup>17</sup> Note Dunnill's comment that, unlike other writings of the time that tended to celebrate either the historical or the eschatological figure of Melchizedek, Hebrews celebrates Melchizedek as 'a bringer of non-order'. John Dunnill, *Covenant and sacrifice in the Letter to the Hebrews*. SNTS 75; Cambridge, CUP, 1992, p. 167.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in T. K. Thomas, "Melchizedek, king and priest: An ecumenical paradigm?", *The Ecumenical Review* 52, 3 (Jul 2000) 403-409

blessing continues in perpetuity through the Son, who endured human time and space to lead humans into divine time and space.

The priesthood of Christ, according to the order of Melchizedek, tells us that grace has no antecedents, no ties to anything human or expected. It drops out of nowhere (nowhere human: God's eternal time), surprises us, is perfect and absolute. It demands an absolute response from us, because not to respond, or to respond and then to turn aside from grace, is unthinkable.

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