

# Who Was Melchizedek?

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The identity of Melchizedek has been the subject of mystery and debate over the years, and still continues to fascinate and intrigue. I am often confronted with fantastic and creative ideas as to who this man really was. The reason for the enigma is largely due to two factors: 1) the brevity of the record of his life, and 2) how he is described in the Epistle to the Hebrews. This has been the cause of speculations that range from the bizarre to the unbelievably ordinary. Can we really learn the identity of this figure? And what does it really matter anyway?



## The Brief Record

The brief record the Bible gives of Melchizedek begins with him meeting Abraham returning from rescuing Lot (Genesis 14:17-20). He is the first priest to be mentioned in the Bible, and is only mentioned one other time in the Old Testament by David in a prophecy about the Messiah and His priesthood (Psalms 110). The final mention of this figure is in the New Testament, in the epistle to the Hebrews (chapter 5, 6 and mainly 7). There is one particular verse in Hebrews that describes Melchizedek in puzzling way.

## The Puzzling Verse

The key verse that has served to fuel the endless and creative speculations about this man is Hebrews 7:3 which describes Melchizedek as “Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually.” Many conclude that this description indicates that Melchizedek had to be some kind of a supernatural being, like an angel perhaps, or even a divine being! After all, no human being could be described as without descent or mother, with no beginning or end.

## Who He Was Not

The wording and meaning of this verse is misunderstood, and this misunderstanding is the fuel for the speculative ideas about this man. Popular among such ideas is that Melchizedek was a divine being. Some suggest that it was actually Christ, appearing in flesh for that generation. This cannot be, of course, for the Bible is clear as to when Christ was made flesh. It was something that happened once, and was so momentous that angels of heaven came to testify of that event. Furthermore, Melchizedek was a type<sup>1</sup> of Christ. It is

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Type’ means a sign; a symbol; a figure of something to come. What the ‘type’ points forward to is called ‘antitype’. For example, the Passover sacrifice was a type of Christ – Christ is the antitype. An antitype is always greater than the type.

impossible for Christ to be a type of himself. Melchizedek is said to be like Christ, and Christ is said to be of his order – which clearly distinguishes the one from the other.

Another really popular idea is that Melchizedek was actually the Holy Spirit appearing in flesh<sup>2</sup>. I find this idea not only extremely speculative, but a distortion of a number of foundational Gospel truths. First of all, the Holy Spirit is not an independent being that can take on flesh<sup>3</sup>. Second, we need a plain indication to warrant such an incredible and miraculous event. Something like “and the Holy Spirit was made flesh, and dwelt among us”. In the absence of such evidence, not only is it dangerous to speculate, but such speculations become ludicrous and an affront to the Gospel message.

### **What the Verse Means**

The puzzling verse is not so puzzling if we understand what Paul was actually trying to say. He was not trying to describe a supernatural being. Here is the verse from another translation:

Hebrews 7:3 "Of whom neither his father nor his mother are written in the genealogies; nor the commencement of his days, nor the end of his life; but, after the likeness of the Son of God, his priesthood remaineth forever." Syriac / Peshitta

Other Bible translations bring out the same thought. Paul is using the absence of the genealogical record to illustrate his point. Paul actually believed the Melchizedek did have a decent or a genealogy (Hebrews 7:6) but that it was not known. He actually believed Melchizedek to be a man (Hebrews 7:4) and not some other being. He was a human being, with a life span that commenced and ended (though not recorded in the Bible).

### **What We Do Learn**

From the brief mentions of this figure we can learn some remarkable things about him:

- 1- He was the king of Salem (Later Jerusalem).
- 2- He was priest of the Most High God.
- 3- He received tithe from Abraham and blessed him (making him greater than Abraham. See Hebrews 7:7).
- 4- He was a man, a priest and king.
- 5- His descent and exact identity are not recorded.
- 6- He serves as a fitting type for Christ who is a priest after his order.

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<sup>2</sup> In support of this claim people use an unconfirmed report that Ellen White identified Melchizedek as the Holy Spirit. This claim is summarily denied by the White Estate and the report is known to be apocryphal.

“Identity of Melchizedek. Mrs. White reportedly identified Melchizedek as the Holy Spirit, according to the memory of one man. There is no support in her writings for this teaching, and the memory statement is offset by denials of others who were present when Ellen G. White is supposed to have made this statement. She did not identify Melchizedek. See Ellen G. White statement in the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, vol. 1, p. 1093, in which she says Melchizedek was not Christ.” <http://www.whiteestate.org/issues/faq-mist.html>

<sup>3</sup> For more information about this point you can watch the presentation “[The Forgotten Truth](#)”.

Here is the type (Melchizedek) and the antitype (Christ) side by side. It will be readily seen that Melchizedek had to be a man in order to be a fitting type for the man Christ Jesus. The priesthood of Melchizedek continues through the person of Christ.

<b>Melchizedek</b>	<b>Jesus Christ</b>
Man	Man
Priest	Priest
King	King

### **Jewish Tradition**

As a point of interest, Jewish tradition identifies Melchizedek as Shem, Noah's son and survivor of the flood. This understanding is based on the information found in the Old Testament regarding Melchizedek. The Jews saw this figure as a man, a human being (regardless of which human it might have been), and not as a supernatural being. This information would doubtless have been known to Paul (when he authored Hebrews) who also described Melchizedek as a man. His point was that this man serves as a fitting type for Christ.

### **Why does it matter?**

The humanity of Christ is one of the foundational pillars of our faith as Christians. It is what links us to Him. He is our elder brother. Melchizedek was a living type (a prophecy, if you wish) of what Christ would one day come to be. As a priest for men he had to be a man (Hebrews 5:1) just like Christ is our sympathetic human priest. Interestingly enough, every single priest that is ever mentioned in the Bible is a human being. We never read of any non-human priests anywhere in the Bible. Even Christ only became our glorious high priest after taking on our human nature (Hebrews 2:17).

### **Conclusion**

Misunderstanding the identity of the man Melchizedek has led to countless speculations and even disputes. In the process, the beautiful type that is portrayed in scripture is wrested. Melchizedek was not a divine being (such as the Holy Spirit) appearing in flesh for that generation. That concept diminishes the impact of John 3:16 and presents multiple mediators. He was not Christ coming as flesh before He was born of Mary – that idea casts a bizarre reflection on the prophecy of Isaiah 9:6. Though the available information is scant, the evidence is clear that Melchizedek was a human being representing Christ who would one day come as a human being. This connection is our assurance that we have a faithful and sympathetic High priest who is touched with the feeling of our infirmities (Hebrews 4:15). He is the true antitype of every earthly priest. ✍

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