

THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS - PARK VII -

JESUS AS THE FULFILLMENT OF THE PROMISES TO ABRAHAM

AND OF THE MINISTRY OF MELCHIZEDEK

I. In the middle of chapter 6, the letter then gets back to the theme of Christ as the great high priest and expounds upon the earlier statement that He was appointed a high priest "according to the order of Melchizedek. See Hebrews 5:10

A. This discussion begins by describing God as swearing "by Himself" in order to give promises to Abraham.

1. When He called Abraham from the city of Ur, God first promised to make of him a great nation through whom all nations of the earth would be blessed. See Gen. 12:1-3. Through later encounters God made it clear that Abraham would have direct descendants more numerous than the stars of the sky, and that those descendants would possess the Promised Land. He also promised an "everlasting covenant" that would involve many nations. See Gen. 17:1-22; 22:16-18

2. The letter explains that God did not merely assure Abraham of these things but swore an oath so that all future generations would have two guarantees of the promises: God's own reliability and the oath.

- An oath was a call for God to guarantee the truth of a statement, and in ancient times called for a curse if the speaker was false. In Abraham's case, the ritual was the splitting of several animals with Abraham and the fire representing God passing through them. The idea is that breaking the oath would divide the person as the animals were divided.

- Abraham himself simply placed faith in God, whom he heard and, as least through angels, saw. Future generations could look to that covenant and see the guarantee take place throughout history.

3. The letter says Abraham obtained that promise, which could have meant either that, in Isaac, he saw the future promises fulfilled. But more likely, it means that he personally saw Christ and was saved by Him. See Matt. 22:32; John 8:56.

B. The letter then sets forth the covenant promised to Abraham, and God's faithfulness shown through it as our "anchor of hope."

1 Even among the Greeks and Romans, the anchor was a symbol of the steadiness of virtue amidst the storms of the world. Christianity has seen it as a symbol for the virtue of hope, the trust in God amidst the storms of life and of history.

2. The letter adds here another symbol that it will develop later, the veil. The veil in the temple set aside the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary where God's presence was most powerful. No one except the high priest could enter, for God's holiness was too great.

- This veil was torn at the death of Christ, both reflecting the end of the Old Covenant and the ability of all the faithful now to enter into the presence of God. See Matt. 27:51.

- The letter now says that we can enter behind that veil to place our confidence in God, for Jesus has set forth the way for us, in His office as the great high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. As the letter will explain, the veil here is not that of the earthly Temple, but of the heavenly Temple that the Temple in Jerusalem represented.

C. The letter then goes on to describe how it is that Melchizedek represented a greater role than Abraham and thus a higher priesthood than the Levites had.

1. The Book of Genesis does not describe exactly who Melchizedek was, except that he was the priest king of Salem.

- When Abraham came from his victory over the armies of four kings who had captured his nephew Lot, he went to Salem, which would according to most commentators later become Jerusalem. (St. Jerome, however, argued that Salem was closer to the Jordan and would later become the place where John the Baptist ministered.) The king Melchizedek came out offering bread and wine and gave Abraham a blessing. Abraham in turn gave him a tenth (tithe) of the spoils of war. Although much revered by the Jews, the only other part of their Scriptures that refers to him is Psalm 110.

2. Jewish commentators said different things about Melchizedek.

- Philo of Alexandria, who tried combined Greek philosophy and Jewish theology, thought he was a primordial

representative of human reason.

- Josephus Flavius, a Roman Jewish historian, thought he was a model king who had maintained the worship of the true God in the midst of pagans.

- Some of the apocryphal Jewish books refer to him as Shem, the just son of Noah, who, if one takes the years stated in Genesis literally, would have still been alive when Abraham was called, and in fact for 133 years later. See Gen. 11:11. St. Thomas refers to a commentary on Hebrews that supports this view. Or it could have been a descendant in his family.

- Some of the Qumran scrolls, which were written by an Essene (or Essene-like) monastic community who lived near the Dead Sea at the time of Christ, presented Melchizedek as an angel who would return again in the Messianic age to punish iniquities and restore justice.

3. The letter does not resolve this dispute, but presents Melchizedek as a type, or an early image of Christ himself. It seems also to refer to an "order" that he established, which could mean an actual line of priests that lived outside of the covenant, or simply an image to be fulfilled by Christ.

- The letter does say that he is "without father or mother or genealogy, and neither beginning of days nor end of life."

- If Melchizedek was an angel, this statement would be literally true.

- On the other hand, in rabbinic thought, nothing not written in Scripture was of much importance. Thus, the letter could be saying that the ancestry of Melchizedek and the year of his death were unimportant, unlike the Levitical priesthood, for his call was directly from God, dependant upon no other historical event.

- In any case, the letter is presenting Melchizedek as representing some primordial priesthood, a connection between heaven and earth, that did not depend upon the covenant with Abraham or his successor. It is arguing that Abraham himself recognized this ancient priesthood, greater than himself, by receiving a blessing from Melchizedek and giving him a tithe. Tithing was a crucial part of Jewish offerings, with the Levites frequently receiving tithes to support their ministries. See, e.g., Gen. 14:20, 28:26-27, 35:2; Lev. 27:30-33; 2 Chron. 31:6 The tithes

would then open the way for more generosity and blessings. See Sir. 35:8-10; Mal. 3:10. The letter points out, however, that even this practice was based upon a custom older than the Law of Moses and the Levitical sacrifices.

- The letter then describes the Levites as, in a sense, an offering to Melchizedek. This statement may imply that God wanted there to be a Levitical priesthood from the beginning, although not under the condition it was created, i.e. in response to idolatry by the people. See Gen. 32:27-29.

D. The letter then says, however, that even Melchizedek was only an image, or a preparation for Christ, who brings the whole priesthood to its fulfillment, and who is truly timeless and from God.

II. The letter then brings this argument to its logical conclusion, saying that the Levitical priesthood cannot bring the people to perfection because it is only an image of a priesthood that was both before and after it.

A. The letter argues that, because the priesthood of Melchizedek was greater than Abraham, and the Levite inherited only a portion of the promises of Abraham, the priesthood of the Levites must only be an image of the older priesthood.

B. It then goes on to argue that the priesthood of was not only a past institution from a bygone era, but also a promise of the future, as indicated by Psalm 110.

- Psalm 110 speaks of the future king, who would be of the tribe of Judah, in accordance with the blessing of Jacob, as well as the prophecies of Nathan and later prophets. See Gen. 49:10; 2 Sam. 7:8-17; Isaiah 9:6, 11:1-9; Jer. 33:14-22; Micah 5:1-4. Psalm 110 adds that the king would be a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

- Thus, the letter argues, the future king would have a priesthood greater than the Levites, whose priesthood would give way to the king, as part of a change of law.

C. The letter then says that Jesus our Lord was of the line of Judah, not of the Levites. Thus he was an heir to the Messianic promises, rather than an heir to the Levitical sacrifices, which can now end, having achieved their purpose of pointing the way to Jesus, the better hope.

III. The letter then returns to the idea of an oath. As Abraham was given an oath, so now the new priesthood that allows us to be with

God as Abraham was, or even more so, is confirmed by an oath.

A. Jesus become the visible one who guarantees God's promises.

B. The letter points out that the priests of the Levitical law were themselves subject to death, and therefore, were not forever priests.

- The idea is that they were beneath death (and also by implication afflicted with sin) and, therefore, could themselves not provide the permanent life or covenant so often promised. Their sacrifices could be only symbols of the promise that predated them.

C. The "word of the oath" appoints The Son of God as this priest connecting heaven to earth.

- The idea is that the word of God expressed as an oath is more powerful and more perfect than the mere Levitical regulations that symbolized it. There is no oath about the salvific quality of the Levitical priests, whereas there is an oath about the resurrection of Christ.

- Here again the letter emphasizes the power of God's word.

D. Jesus, being above sin and death, is both the perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice, and therefore, establishes the covenant and sacrifice that brings perfection.

E. It should be noted that there were prophecies of a new Levites (plural), but this time from all peoples, in the Messianic era. See Is. 66:21; Jer. 33:14-26. Thus, the fact that the old Levitical priesthood was superseded did not imply that there would be no more priests.