

“According To The Order Of Melchizedek”: The Use of Psalm 110 in Hebrews 7

By Martin Pickup

Modern biblical scholarship has not been kind in its evaluation of the use of the Old Testament in the book of Hebrews. In past years it was common to categorize the Hebrew writer’s exegesis as allegorical in nature, patterned after the style found in Philo.¹ More recently, F. F. Bruce has suggested that the Hebrew writer regarded the Old Testament as *marshal*, a parable or mystery which he sought to explain.² The prevalent thought today is that Hebrews employs the *midrash* or *peshet* techniques exemplified by the sectarians at Qumran, yet the implication here is usually that the Hebrew writer tends to twist the original meaning of a passage in order to make it conform to his doctrines.³ However the hermeneutics of Hebrews may be categorized, modern scholars in the main tend to conclude that it is an invalid approach. E. F. Scott writes, “To a modern reader the argument of Hebrews is obscure and unconvincing ... (The author employs) a method of proof which appears to us artificial.”⁴ George B. Caird assesses the situation well when he says, “Whatever the commentators may think to be the permanent contribution of the author of Hebrews to Christian theology, most of them have been agreed about one thing—that it is not to be found in his exegesis of the Old Testament, and many of them

¹ C. Spicq, *L’Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1952) 13-15.

² For a rebuttal to Bruce’s mystery-interpretation view, see W. Kaiser, Jr., *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 18.

³ C. B. Caird, “Exegetical Methods of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Canadian Journal of Theology* 5 (1959), 44-51.

⁴ E. F. Scott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1922), 69.

would be prepared to add that the abiding value of his message is actually obscured by the scriptural argument in which it is embedded.”⁵

Perhaps no portion of the book of Hebrews has received more criticism for its Old Testament exegesis than chapter 7. Here the Hebrew writer discusses in detail the significance of the fact that in Psalm 110:4 the Son is designated a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Because of this declaration, he argues for the superiority of the priesthood of Christ over the Levitical system prescribed by the Mosaic law.⁶ The problem for the modern reader is what the Hebrew writer has to say about Melchizedek, the Canaanite priest-king of Genesis 14, and the parallel he alleges between him and Christ. Just who (or what), we must ask, did the Hebrew writer think Melchizedek was? This question particularly arises because of statements the writer makes like the following:

Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God he abides a priest forever . . . of whom it is witnessed that he lives on (vv. 3,8).

Most today would agree with William Neil who says that this chapter is a case of “far-fetched exegesis.”⁷

⁵ C. B. Caird, 44.

⁶ William Neil epitomizes the attitude of many scholars when he says, “Obscure Old Testament characters, like Melchizedek, have little or no interest for us today” (*The Epistle To The Hebrews: Introduction and Commentary* [London: SCM, 1955], 22).

⁷Ibid.

I believe that such an assessment is unjustified. It displays a misconception of the Hebrew writer's argument in this chapter of his epistle, as well as an ignorance of background concepts of kingship and priesthood familiar to the writer and his Jewish audience. I contend that if these points are understood, then not only does what the Hebrew writer says about Melchizedek become clear, but the logic of his explanation of Psalm 110:4 becomes quite impressive.

Preliminary Observations

Hebrews 7 first needs to be placed in its proper setting within the argumentation of the book. Chapter 5 begins the formal discussion of the priesthood of Christ. The author introduces the subject by pointing out the two primary requisites of priesthood: (1) A priest must be selected from among the people whom he is to represent. (2) A priest must have been divinely appointed to this office (vv. 1-10). These requirements are necessary in any priesthood because they strike at the heart of a priest's function. He is a mediator between man and God in the matter of worship. Thus, he must be a true representative of the people, appointed by God to that priestly function. The recipients of Hebrews would no doubt have accepted this as axiomatic. It was certainly true of the Levitical priesthood, and (no doubt) the Melchizedek priesthood. The Hebrew writer points out that it is true in the priesthood of the Christ as well. He became one of the people, and was able to empathize with the oftentimes difficult task of rendering obedience to God. As Psalm 110:4 declared, God was the one who said of the Messiah, "Thou art a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." Before continuing this discussion, the Hebrew writer inserts a warning to his readers about their spiritual immaturity (5:11-6:20). In chapter 7 he picks up where he had left off. His purpose is to

show what must be true of Christ's priesthood since Scripture declared him to be a priest "according to the order of Melchizedek."

There has been much discussion about the meaning of the phrase "according to the order." The Greek word translated "order" is *taxis*, and its precise meaning is somewhat obscure. The Hebrew counterpart is *dibrah*, and its meaning is difficult as well. Nevertheless, most agree that the way in which the Hebrew writer understands the expression is made fairly clear by his own paraphrase in verse 15: "according to the likeness (*homoiotēs*) of Melchizedek." The Hebrew writer is explaining here the similarity between the respective priesthoods of Christ and Melchizedek. He does not understand Christ to have assumed the Melchizedek priesthood; the priesthood of the ancient king of Salem and the priesthood of the Messiah were two separate entities. But he does understand Psalm 110:4 to be saying that the Messiah's priesthood is similar to the priesthood of Melchizedek. The Hebrew writer wants his readers to grasp the significance of the fact that in Psalm 110 the Messiah is not designated a priest after the likeness of the Levitical priesthood, but after the likeness of the Melchizedek priesthood. In chapter 5 the Hebrew writer had discussed the requirements fundamental to every priesthood, but now he concentrates on the key differences between the priesthoods of Melchizedek and Levi -- differences which would warrant the Messiah's priesthood being likened to the former and not the latter.

Overview of The Argumentation

Before we look specifically at what the Hebrew writer says of Melchizedek, it will be helpful to survey the arguments that he makes in the rest of the chapter. In verses 4-10 he discusses the superior position of Melchizedek over Abraham as seen in the

events related in Genesis 14:18-20. Abraham implicitly acknowledged his lower rank by offering tithes to Melchizedek. If Abraham held a lower status, then certainly the Levites, the descendants of Abraham, did also. The Levites held the priestly office, but they were not greater than this priest, because “so to speak, through Abraham even Levi...paid tithes” (v. 9). Furthermore, Melchizedek blessed Abraham, “and without any dispute the lesser is blessed by the greater” (v. 7). By establishing the superiority of Melchizedek over the Levitical priests the Hebrew writer is demonstrating the superiority of Christ, for his priesthood was declared to be after the order of Melchizedek.

In verses 20-22 the Hebrew writer further argues for the superiority of Christ by observing that God had confirmed the Messiah’s priestly appointment with an oath in Psalm 110:4. The Levites had not been so honored, for each one became a priest purely by succession and not by specific appointment through a divine oath.

The superiority of Christ’s priesthood is also seen in the fact that he himself abides a priest forever (vv. 23-25). Human mortality prevented the Levitical priests from carrying out their priestly function indefinitely. They required successors, but Christ did not. “He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (v. 25).

Christ must also be regarded as a greater priest because he was totally sinless (vv. 26-28). The Levitical priests had to offer sacrifices for their own sins before they could mediate on behalf of the people. But Christ was a priest who was “holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily to offer up sacrifices, first for his own sins...” (vv. 26-27).

In verses 11-19 the Hebrew writer argues that the change of priesthood from the Levitical to the messianic logically demanded a change from the Mosaic Law as well. That the Levitical priesthood had been changed was indicated by the fact that the Messiah had been called to be a priest. According to the Mosaic Law, only those from the tribe of Levi could be priests; but the Messiah was from the tribe of Judah. Yet Psalm 110:4 declared that the Messiah would be a priest when he assumed his throne. Now that Christ had begun his reign, the old priesthood and the Law of Moses which rested upon it must have been superseded. The old system must have been inherently deficient or God would never have made the change. The Hebrew writer says, “Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for a priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron?” (v. 11).

The above arguments are all logical inferences drawn from Psalm 110. Everything rests upon this premise: Psalm 110 referred directly to the Messiah. This is an important point, for if Psalm 110 was a corporate promise referring to the Davidic royal lineage generally, then the Hebrew writer’s conclusion that Christ’s reception of priesthood demanded a change from the Mosaic system is a non sequitur. If God was declaring all Davidic kings priests like Melchizedek, then (by the Hebrew writer’s reasoning) the Mosaic Law would have been abrogated at the time the Davidic throne was first established. As Delitzsch has pointed out, “If even David, who raised the Levitical priesthood to the pinnacle of splendour that had never existed before, was a priest after the manner of Melchizedek, it is not intelligible how the priesthood of Jesus Christ after the manner of Melchizedek is meant to be a proof in favor of the termination of the

Levitical priesthood, and to absolutely preclude its continuance.”⁸ The fact of the matter is that the Hebrew writer did not understand the Davidic kings as a whole to be priests. His statements in 7:13 indicate that he understood that prior to the time of Christ no one from the tribe of Judah could hold the office the Levites possessed. Clearly then, the Hebrew writer is basing his arguments in this chapter upon the premise that Psalm 110 was speaking exclusively of the messianic king. The cogency of the Hebrew writer’s argumentation depends upon the validity of this premise.

The Jews of the first century clearly viewed Psalm 110 as messianic. But was it regarded as exclusively so? The gospel account of Jesus’ discussion with the Pharisees concerning Psalm 110 indicates that this was indeed the normal way of interpreting it. In an attempt to show that the Messiah must be more than merely the son of David, Jesus asks, “Then how does David in the Spirit call Him ‘lord,’ saying, ‘The Lord said to my lord: Sit at My right hand, until I put thine enemies beneath thy feet.’ If David then calls him ‘lord,’ how is he his son?” (vv. 43-45). Jesus’ argument for the superiority of the Messiah even above his ancestor is predicated upon the understanding that David was the author of the psalm, and therefore the one who called the king under discussion “my lord.” If the psalm had been commonly viewed as written by someone else -- who was declaring what was true regarding all of the Davidic kings -- then the psalm would be saying nothing about the Messiah that it did not also say about king David. But the psalm title in both the Masoretic and Septuagint texts gives David as the author.⁹ Throughout

⁸F. Delitzsch, *The Psalms*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 185.

⁹For a discussion of the authorship question in the Psalm titles, see D. Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1975), 391-392.

the New Testament, the Davidic authorship of Psalm 110 is presented as an assumed fact (Matt. 22:43; Mk. 12:36; Lk. 20:42; Acts 2:34). If Jesus' premise regarding the psalm's Davidic authorship and exclusive messianic reference was not generally accepted by the Jews, then all the Pharisees would have had to do was point this out. Yet Matthew 22:46 says, "And no one was able to answer him a word."

It is evident that the Hebrew writer's argument in verses 11-19 was based upon a commonly accepted premise regarding the Davidic authorship and exclusive messianic reference of Psalm 110. Granting this premise, the writer's conclusion regarding the supersession of the Mosaic Law and priesthood is irrefutable. Modern scholars, however, have tended to deny the validity of this premise. The ancient Jews may have regarded Psalm 110 as a directly messianic prophecy, but today most scholars argue that it referred to the Davidic kings generally on the grounds of the parallel between the Davidic kingship and kingships throughout the ancient Near East. It would be good to give attention to this matter.

In the ancient Near East a king was commonly viewed as the son of his nation's chief deity. The divine sonship of the king also involved his functioning as the nation's chief priest. As the connecting link between the gods and the people, the king was the obvious best choice to mediate on behalf of the people to the gods.¹⁰ In the Ras Shamra texts king Keret, the son of El, performed sacrifice as a priest.¹¹ Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian rulers all called themselves "priest" as well as "king." A pupil's copy tablet

¹⁰C. J. Gadd, *Ideas of Divine Rule in the Ancient Near East* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 39.

¹¹Gadd, 28, 39.

found at Ur. preserves the following testimonial: “I am the god who favors his majesty, who establishes his foundation; he who lays the base of his priesthood.”¹² The El-Amarna tablets provide evidence for the existence of king-priests in Canaan.¹³ In Egypt, not only was the pharaoh a priest, but in theory he was the only one in the land qualified to administer the sacred rites (though practical demands prompted the establishment of a lower strata of priests to function on the pharaoh’s behalf.)¹⁴ Priesthood is known to have been an essential prerogative of kingship in the original constitution of Rome. It began with Romulus and extended to the time of Tarquin. After a long period it was revived with Julius Caesar. So integral was the association of priesthood with royalty that even when the Romans abolished kingship and established a republican form of government, they ordained a *Rex Sacrorum* (“king of the sacred rites), who would attend to the sacerdotal rituals which the kings had formerly carried out.¹⁵

It is clear that in the ancient Near East, kingship and priesthood were not normally thought of as two separate offices, but as the natural two-fold function of the king as son of the deity. This being the case, modern scholars have looked for the same occurrence in Israel as well. Psalm 110:4 has been a major focus of attention. It is alleged that this psalm records what was considered true for the entire royal lineage: a kingship conjoined

¹²Gadd, 28, 39.

¹³F. L. Horton, Jr., *The Melchizedek Tradition. A Critical Examination of The Sources To The Fifth Century And In The Epistle To The Hebrews.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 40-42.

¹⁴Gadd, 39.

¹⁵James Gray, *A Dissertation On The Coincidence Between The Priesthoods of Jesus Christ And Melchisedek [sic.]* (Hagerstown: William Stewart, 1884), 35.

with priesthood. The establishment of the Davidic throne in Jerusalem, formerly ruled over by the Canaanite priest-king Melchizedek, is thought to have fomented the notion that the Davidic kings were likewise priest-kings. Psalm 110:4 is understood to say that David and his royal successors had inherited the role of priest-kingship from Melchizedek.¹⁶

It cannot be denied that the kingship of David was fundamentally structured in accordance with the ancient Near Eastern conception of what the office of king entailed. Israel asked to have a king “like all the nations,” and God granted their request (1 Sam. 8:5). The common pagan conception of the relationship between deity and king was easily adapted into a form compatible with Israel’s monotheism. But there were aspects of divine sonship which other nations had adopted that were not part of Israel’s kingship. In Egypt divine sonship implied the divinity of the king, but this was clearly not the case with the Davidic rulers. We also see that in Israel the king’s obligation to be obedient to his Father was emphasized to an extent far beyond what is evidenced in other cultures. The divine sonship of the king in Israel manifests a borrowing of the concept found in other nations, but it was a borrowing with significant adaptation.

This is also what we observe in the matter of the priestly role of the king. Kingship and priesthood were separate in Israel in a way that was unique to the ancient Near East in general. Modern scholars who wish to deny this have to reconstruct the biblical text to such an extent that they undermine any ground for accepting the textual data at all. Now it is true that the Davidic kings did exercise a mediatory function,

¹⁶E.g., A. Cody, *A History of Old Testament Priesthood* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969); L. Sabourin, *Priesthood. A Comparative Study* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973).

representing the people before God. As king, David set up the temple worship (1 Chron. 22-23); he wore an ephod (2 Sam. 6:14); he received the plan of the temple from God and his offspring built it. This is a clear parallel to the sacral role of the king in the ancient Near East. But despite all of this, a clear distinction between the Davidic king and the priesthood itself was constantly maintained. Though the king might be said to have had, in some sense, a “sacral” position, he was not a priest, could not function in the temple as one, and was certainly not viewed as the chief priest. The Israelite king was totally deprived by genealogy from functioning as a priest. King Uzziah was condemned for trying to assume priestly duties and driven from the temple (2 Chron. 26:16-20).

The simple fact is that, apart from Psalm 110:4, there is no place in the Old Testament where the king is called a *kohen*, the technical Hebrew term for priest. F. L. Horton, however, still tries to interpret Psalm 110 as referring to the Davidic lineage corporately by suggesting that the word *kohen* in verse 4 is not used in its normal sense, but simply carries the idea of “official.”¹⁷ Horton’s position is quite weak. The word is clearly paralleled with “Melchizedek” in verse 4, so the sense in which Melchizedek was a *kohen* must be the same sense in which the king in the psalm is so designated. Melchizedek was clearly a *kohen* in the technical sense of the term. To view Psalm 110, therefore, as affirming the dual role of kingship and priesthood for the entire Davidic royal lineage is to go beyond the biblical data. (And again, if the Davidic authorship of Psalm 110 is acknowledged then such a conclusion is totally precluded.)

¹⁷Horton, 45-47.

Psalm 110, therefore, looked beyond the current line of Davidic kings to a final king in whom the Davidic promise would find its ultimate fulfillment. This great ruler would have the universal dominion Psalm 110 described. He would not be hampered by the inherent inadequacy of separated kingly and priestly functions, as was the case under the Mosaic system in force at the time of the psalm's writing. He would be the complete king, the perfect king, he would be everything a king should be.¹⁸

¹⁸The recognized deficiency of the then current separation of kingly and priestly offices is seen further in Zech. 6:9-13 where Joshua, the Levitical high priest, is symbolically ordained as both king and priest.

This is what the Hebrew writer is affirming Christ to be on the basis of Psalm 110. Though the Jews readily acknowledged the messianic reference of the psalm, the implications of the promise of priesthood for the Messiah presented a difficulty to them. The Jewish Christians to whom Hebrews was written likewise seem to have been slow to accept the full implications of the Messiah being designated a priest in Psalm 110. But the Hebrew writer is saying that if one part of the Psalm presents the truth about the Messiah, then all it says of him must be accepted. Christ was designated as both a king and a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. The ramifications of this fact were far-reaching. The Levitical priesthood had been superseded. The Law of Moses had been abrogated. They were both thereby shown to have been inferior. The Hebrew writer is forcefully demonstrating what the implications of Psalm 110 were, and he urges his readers to accept these implications.

“For This Melchizedek...”

The brunt of the criticism that Hebrews 7 has received has been directed at verses 1-3. Here the Hebrew writer reminds his readers of the facts concerning the Canaanite priest-king spoken of in Genesis 14:18-20.

(1) For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, (2) to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all the spoils, was first of all, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace. (3) Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he abides a priest perpetually.

Ronald Williamson says, “This kind of biblical proof... would seem to the members of the community to which it was addressed, at least the writer hoped it would, more

forceful than it does to us now.”¹⁹ Marvin Vincent voices the opinion of most scholars today when he says, “It is, of course, evident to the most superficial reader that such exposition of the O.T. scripture is entirely artificial, and that it amounts to nothing as proof of the writer’s position.”²⁰ I believe these types of statements are totally unwarranted. In the remainder of this paper I will analyze the meaning of these verses and seek to support my contention that the Hebrew writer’s exegesis is altogether sound.

In verses 1-2 the Hebrew writer is recounting what Genesis 14:18-20 stated about the meeting of Melchizedek and Abraham. (Aside from Psalm 110:4, Melchizedek is not mentioned again in the Old Testament.) Genesis calls Melchizedek a “priest of the Most High God.” Contextually this is a reference to Yahweh. Modern scholars have repudiated the accuracy of the text here. Some have categorically denied the historicity of Melchizedek. The evidence for Canaanite priest-kings during this era has led others to affirm that Genesis does preserve a tradition regarding a historical person. They do not believe Melchizedek was a priest of Yahweh, however, but a priest of some Canaanite god. El, the henotheistic deity worshiped during the second millennium B.C. is one suggestion.²¹ It is claimed that Melchizedek was actually one of a long line of pagan priest-kings whose story was incorporated into the Genesis narrative with alteration so that it would coincide with Jewish monotheism.

¹⁹R. Williamson, *Philo And The Epistle To The Hebrews* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 441.

²⁰M. Vincent, *Word Studies In The New Testament*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1946), 456.

²¹M. Delcor, “Melchizedek From Genesis To The Qumran Texts And The Epistle To The Hebrews,” *Journal For The Study of Judaism* 2 (1971), 116-119.

The Hebrew writer and his readers accepted the factuality and integrity of the biblical text, as did the Jews of his day. Josephus, for example, speaks of Melchizedek as “a potent man among the Canaanites” who was “the first priest of God [i.e. Yahweh].”²² We must assess the Hebrew writer’s exegesis from this standpoint. Though no further attention need be given this matter as far as the purposes of this paper are concerned, it is worth adding that an understanding of the pagan priest-king setting of the Genesis narrative actually fits in perfectly with the data provided in Genesis. In no way does it contradict a belief in the historical accuracy of the Scripture. Abraham is depicted as a man who was called out of paganism to serve Yahweh, the true God (Josh. 24:2-3). The same thing could have been true of Melchizedek. Genesis states that “the iniquity of the Amorite (was) not yet complete” at the time of Abraham (15:16), and Melchizedek’s efforts to promote the truth about Yahweh in Salem may be one reason why. But God indicated that the full corruption of the pagan Canaanites would be complete by the time of the exodus. Accordingly, we see that when the Israelites under Joshua invade Canaan, the city of Salem is once again devoted to paganism under the rule of Adonizedek (Josh. 10:1). Melchizedek’s efforts had failed to endure beyond his lifetime.

The Hebrew writer obviously mentions the significance of the title Melchizedek, which he says means “king of righteousness,” because of the parallel with Christ.²³ The ideal portrait of the Davidic king was always that of a righteous ruler, and the Messiah

²²*Wars of the Jews* 6:10:1.

²³ D. Stuart has shown that the proper meaning of the name Melchizedek is “king of righteousness” and not “my king is righteous.” The long “i” is anatyptic and not the first common singular possessive (“Proper Names,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, ed. G. W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1986], 486.) Melchizedek is a compound formed in the same manner as the name Adonizedek (“lord of righteousness”) in Joshua 10:1.

was to fulfill this ideal.²⁴ This etymology has been challenged by some modern scholars who say that “Melchizedek” was actually a pagan theocratic designation meaning, for example, “(the god) Sedeq is my king.”²⁵ But the etymology the Hebrew writer gives clearly did not originate with him; it was the accepted derivation of that day. Josephus makes an identical observation about the title, saying, “(he) is in our tongue called [Melchizedek], the Righteous King, for such he really was.”²⁶

The Hebrew writer notes that Melchizedek was the “king of Salem.” He does not say here that Salem was the former name of the city of Jerusalem, but this was the common understanding at that time. Psalm 76:3 identifies Salem with Jerusalem. The Genesis Apocryphon, Josephus and all of the Targums indicate that Salem was the original name for Jerusalem.²⁷ Some scholars have denied the accuracy of this identification, but geographically Jerusalem is in a proper location to fit the incident recorded in Genesis. Psalm 110:4 has much more significance if the priest-king who is declared to typify the messianic Davidic king was priest-king of the future capital city of the Davidic monarchy.

The point the Hebrew writer makes about Salem is that this word meant “peace.” As the king of this city, Melchizedek was “king of peace.” Philo makes the same observation about the etymology of “Salem” in *Legum Allegoriae* 3:79.²⁸ The Hebrew

²⁴See Ps. 45:6-7 (which the writer applies to Christ in 1:8-9) and Is. 9:7.

²⁵J. A. Fitzmyer, “Now This Melchizedek...” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963), 312, n. 4.

²⁶*Wars of the Jews* 6:10:1.

²⁷*Genesis Apocryphon* 22:18; *Antiquities...* 1:10:2, 7:3:2; *Wars...* 6:10:1.

²⁸See W. S. LaSor, “Jerusalem,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, ed. G.

writer notes such facts about Melchizedek because they corresponded so well to Christ. The Old Testament had predicted that the messianic kingdom would be one of peace (Isaiah 11:6-10). There is nothing artificial or fanciful in this line of reasoning; God himself had indicated in Psalm 110:4 the correlation between the Messiah and Melchizedek. The Hebrew writer is simply delineating what the obvious parallels are.

The real difficulty with what the Hebrew writer affirms about Melchizedek in these opening verses of the chapter lies with verse 3. Here Melchizedek is said to be “without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God he abides a priest perpetually.”²⁹ Is the Hebrew writer saying that the priest-king in Genesis 14 was something other than a human being? This is what some have concluded. Some have suggested that he believed Melchizedek was a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. But the statement in verse 3 that Melchizedek was “made like the Son of God” renders this untenable. Others allege that the Hebrew writer believed Melchizedek was an angel or some sort of supernatural being. The writer drew upon this mythological idea about Melchizedek because it corresponded to his supernatural view of Christ.

It would be logical to look at other contemporary Jewish writings concerning Melchizedek to see if a supernatural view of this Old Testament character can be observed there. Josephus, Philo, and the *Genesis Apocryphon* all refer to the incident about Melchizedek and Abraham recorded in Genesis 14. Josephus speaks of Melchizedek as the historical figure who was king and priest of God in Jerusalem. He says Melchizedek built the city, was the first priest of God, and the first one to build a temple for God in Jerusalem.³⁰ None of the above sources give any indication that Melchizedek was regarded as anything more than a human being.

²⁹ Many scholars have begun to regard v. 3 as a poetic composition, possibly not original to Hebrews, which preserved extra-biblical traditions about Melchizedek. See Paul J. Kobelski, *Melchizedek And Melchiresa* (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association Of America, 1981), 120.

³⁰ *Wars of the Jews* 6:10:1.

With the exception of the Onkelos Targum, the Targums on Genesis 14 identify Melchizedek with Shem, the son of Noah. The apparent reason for doing so is to make Melchizedek an ancestor of Abraham and thus explain why Abraham would have honored Melchizedek as his superior.³¹ (It is apparent that the Hebrew writer was not the only one to see the ramification of Abraham being blessed by Melchizedek and giving him tithes.) One Jewish tradition even declared that Melchizedek (Shem) sinned and fell from divine favor, and so was replaced by the Levitical priesthood.³² Delcor suggests that this rabbinic presentation of the fall of Melchizedek was a rebuttal to the Christian argumentation presented in Hebrews. “It was indeed necessary to remove any support from the comparison between the priesthood of Jesus and that of Melchizedek by contesting the priesthood of the latter.”³³

One rabbinic writing speaks of Melchizedek as an eschatological figure accompanying the Messiah: “It is written in Zechariah (2,3): ‘The eternal showed me four workmen.’...These four workmen are: the Messiah son of David, the Messiah son of Joseph, Elijah, and Melchizedek.”³⁴ It may be that Psalm 110 was the basis for this expectation of an eschatological individual who could be addressed with the Melchizedek title, since the psalm has clear eschatological references in verses 5-7. If so, it is interesting that this individual was interpreted as someone other than the Messiah. This

³¹Sabourin, 177.

³²B. Nedarim 32b.

³³Delcor, 132.

³⁴B. Sukka 52b.

may have been due to the problem the Jews saw with one being designated a priest who was not of the priestly tribe of Levi.

None of the above writings give any hint of a Jewish view that the Melchizedek figure of Genesis 14 was considered a supernatural being. The only ancient Jewish writing that could arguably be interpreted as conceiving of Melchizedek as someone other than a human being is a poorly preserved document from Qumran known as 11QMelch. Apparently a commentary on several Old Testament passages, this fragmentary document speaks of an eschatological figure called Melchizedek who seems to be portrayed as an angelic being. It is generally understood by scholars that the text uses the designation "Melchizedek" as another name for Michael, the arch-angel presented in the book of Daniel as the chief angelic prince of Israel (Dan. 10:13,21; 12:1). Michael the arch-angel plays a prominent role in several of the eschatological texts among the Qumran scrolls. But there is nothing in 11QMelch that suggests that this angelic figure was being identified with the priest-king of Salem mentioned in Genesis 14.

The above survey shows that there is no evidence that ancient Jews regarded the Melchizedek of Genesis 14 as a supernatural being. This fact argues strongly against interpreting the Hebrew writer's comments of chapter 7 in such a light. Nevertheless, many commentators presume that the description of Melchizedek in Hebrews 7:3 cannot be reasonably understood in any other way. Therefore let me now address this controversial passage.

“He Abides a Priest Forever”

It is important to realize that in this chapter the Hebrew writer is addressing the question of what Psalm 110:4 meant when it declared the Messiah to be a priest like Melchizedek. We have already noted the Hebrew writer's conclusion that God had established a new priesthood, one dissimilar to the Levitical priesthood but similar to the Melchizedek priesthood (7:11-19). This would prompt one to identify the differences between the Levitical and Melchizedek priesthoods, and this is exactly what the Hebrew writer is doing in this chapter.

The first observation made about Melchizedek in verse 3 is that he is “without father” (*apator*). This term was used by the Greeks to refer to children who were orphaned, abandoned, estranged or illegitimate. It was also used of divine beings.³⁵ However, Moulton and Milligan have shown that in genealogical records *apator* did not mean “fatherless,” but simply “father unknown.”³⁶ The same thing would be true of the expression “without mother” (*ameter*). Philo said of Abraham's wife Sarah, “She is said not to have had a mother [*ameter*], having received the inheritance of relationship from her father only.”³⁷ The rabbis commonly said of a newly proselyted Gentile, “He has no father,” since he had no legitimate Jewish ancestry.³⁸

³⁵W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of The New Testament And Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 82.

³⁶J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of The Greek Testament Illustrated From The Papyri And Other Non-Literary Sources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1930), 54-55.

³⁷*De Ebriet*, par. 14. Quoted in R. Milligan, *Hebrews*. Vol. 9, *The New Testament Commentary* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1946), 197-198.

³⁸R. Milligan, 197.

A possible parallel to Hebrews 7:3 has been found in the El-Amarna tablets. One tablet, dated in the first half of the 14th century B.C., is a letter to the Egyptian pharaoh from a priest-king named `Abdi-Hiba, ruler of the city of Urusalim (in all likelihood the city of Jerusalem.)³⁹ In the letter he says, “Behold, as for me, not my father, and not my mother set me in this place; the arm of the mighty King brought me into the house of my father! Why should I commit transgression against the King, my lord?”⁴⁰ `Abdi-Hiba is disclaiming any right to the throne by succession, since he possessed no royal or priestly genealogy.⁴¹ The tablets show him to have been originally a low-ranking official in the king’s administration.⁴² Though not in the kingly lineage, he had been elevated to the throne by the Egyptian pharaoh, as Egypt had control over Urusalim during this period.

³⁹LaSor, 999-1000.

⁴⁰286:9-15. This formula is repeated throughout the document. Cited in J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Related to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 487. I have given the literal rendering of the text, removing the translator’s interpolations so that the similarity to Heb. 7:3 will be more apparent.

⁴¹Horton, 40.

⁴²See 285:5-6,14; 288:9-10; 287:69.

The word for “without genealogy” (*agenealogetos*) is found nowhere in the New Testament nor in any contemporary extra-biblical literature. Moulton and Milligan suggest that it was coined by the Hebrew writer.⁴³ Those who assert that this term and the others in verse 3 indicate the Hebrew writer thought of Melchizedek as a supernatural being who did not originate through biological generation are ignoring what the writer says in verse 6 about Melchizedek: “...whose genealogy (*genealogetos*) is not traced from them (i.e. Abraham and the Levites).” Here the Hebrew writer indicates that Melchizedek did indeed have an ancestry, but it was not connected with the Jews. This means that “without genealogy” in verse 3 must be qualified. Whatever the Hebrew writer means to say about Melchizedek, he cannot be understood as saying that Melchizedek was supernatural. He simply uses the word *agenealogetos* to expand upon the idea introduced by the previous terms *apator* and *amator*, viz., that Melchizedek’s genealogy was unknown. The Old Testament recorded nothing about the parents or overall ancestry of Melchizedek, and yet he was certainly a priest. He was without father, mother and genealogy in the context of genealogical record-keeping. Thus, it was evident that priestly ancestry was not requisite for the priesthood of Melchizedek. He did not obtain his office by succession. This set his priesthood apart from the Levitical priesthood.

It may be that Josephus and Philo are making substantially the same observation about Melchizedek in their writings. Josephus’ statement that Melchizedek was “the first priest” of God obviously points to an absence of predecessors and the fact that he did not

⁴³J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of The Greek Testament*, 3. The noun *genealogia* occurs in 1 Tim. 1:4 and Ti. 3:9 in reference to the formulation or discussion of pedigrees. See R. K. Harrison, “Genealogy,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, ed. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1982), 424.

inherit the office (*Antiquities* 6:10:1). Where did Josephus get this idea? The most reasonable supposition is that he noted in Scripture that Melchizedek is the first priest mentioned, and that he is introduced as king and priest without any reference to ancestry. Philo seems to make a similar observation when he says that Melchizedek possessed a priesthood that was “self-taught and instinctive (*automathes* and *autodidaktos*).”⁴⁴ His priesthood was self-taught and instinctive because he did not inherit his office from a predecessor. Philo also says, “God has also made Melchizedek both king of peace (for that is the meaning of ‘Salem’) and his own priest, not having prefigured any work of his, but having made him at first a king both peaceable and worthy of his priesthood” (*Legum Allegoriae* 3:79). Philo seems to be saying what Josephus said, that Melchizedek was the first priest of God. Philo is not allegorizing here; he is simply drawing a logical inference from Scripture.

Hereditary succession was an integral element of Old Testament Judaism. The entire Jewish system was predicated upon it. The kingship was based upon descent from David. Being a legitimate heir to the Abrahamic promise depended upon the purity of one’s Abrahamic descent. It was for this reason that, at the time of the return from exile, three families were denied rights of citizenship since they could not show proof in the genealogical records that they were of the seed of Abraham (Ezra 2:59-63; Neh. 7:61-65).⁴⁵ The importance of pedigree is illustrated by the historian Josephus who recounts in

⁴⁴*De Congressu*, par. 99. See discussions in Horton, 156-159 and P. J. Kobelski, *Melchizedek And Melchiresa* (Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1981), 120.

⁴⁵See C. F. Keil, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, trans. S. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1952), 41.

his autobiography the nobility of his own priestly ancestry and assures the reader that his genealogical information can be found in “the public records.”⁴⁶

According to the Law of Moses the Jewish priesthood was a hereditary right, based solely upon genealogical succession. General service at the sanctuary was dependent upon one being of the tribe of Levi, and to serve as priest one had to be of the lineage of Aaron. To be a high priest one had to be from the high priestly family. A priest who took as his wife a harlot, a divorced woman, or a woman not of his own people defiled himself and the priestly succession (Lev. 21:7, 13-15). The Talmud says that the primary qualification for entrance into the Levitical priesthood was being able to prove the purity of one’s priestly ancestry by means of an accepted genealogical record.⁴⁷ Nowhere is this necessity more vividly displayed than in the return from exile when the Jews sought to re-establish the priestly ministry. The families of Habaiah, Hakkoz and Barzillai could not discover their names in the ancestral registers.⁴⁸ Since they were unable to verify they were of the priestly lineage, “they were considered unclean and excluded from the priesthood” (Ezra 2:61-62).

The Hebrew writer, therefore, is not speaking in 7:3 of the absence of Melchizedek’s biological parentage, but his absence of priestly ancestry -- a fact which

⁴⁶*Life of Flavius Josephus*, par. 1.

⁴⁷See A. Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry And Services* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., repr., 1982), 94-96.

⁴⁸ The Hebrew phrase is “book of *hammityahsim*” and it referred to a book in which genealogical records were kept. The root word *yahas* was the term used to refer to legitimate family descent. By the post-exilic period it had developed the technical sense of a genealogical register (Ezra 8:1; 1 Chron. 4:33), or the process by which one’s lineage was officially recognized (Neh. 7:5). See R. K. Harrison, “Genealogy,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 2, ed. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub.Co., 1982), 424.

stood out in stark contrast to the necessary requirement for the Levitical priesthood. Genesis 14 introduced Melchizedek as the priest of God, but it said nothing about his ancestry. This is noteworthy because a position held by hereditary succession was customarily indicated by a reference to one's ancestors in order to substantiate one's right to that position. (Consider, for example, the many times in Scripture when a king or priest is introduced as "...the son of ...") The absence of any notation of ancestry for Melchizedek in Genesis 14 stands out even more prominently because this narrative is contained within the section of Genesis where the genealogical tracing of the nations of the ancient world is given lengthy attention. The fact that Scripture, even in such a context, saw a record of the ancestry of Melchizedek as unnecessary pointed to the fact that, contrary to the Levitical system, his priesthood was not predicated upon hereditary succession. Scripture was silent about his ancestry since it was extraneous to his priesthood. Melchizedek's priesthood originated with Melchizedek himself.

Horton is probably correct when he says that "the silence of Scripture about the life and parentage of Melchizedek is brought out by the author of Hebrews as an amplification of the concept of the originality of Melchizedek's priesthood and not as a proof of that originality."⁴⁹ This fact about Melchizedek's priesthood was probably nothing new to the readers of the epistle. If Melchizedek, like Abraham, had been called out of paganism to serve Yahweh as a priest, then the fact that his priesthood was not based upon hereditary right would have been self-evident. The Hebrew writer is merely emphasizing the absence of these items in Melchizedek's case because they were so vital

⁴⁹Horton, 159.

to the Levitical priesthood, based as it was upon hereditary succession. That this is the writer's point in verse 3 is further indicated in verses 13-16 when the writer turns to Jesus. He says, "The one concerning whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no one has officiated at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests. And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become such not on the basis of a Law of physical requirement."

The next phrase in verse 3, "having neither beginning of days nor end of life" has been a particular puzzle. Many, of course, have supposed this phrase to be addressing the supernatural nature of Melchizedek. But if the previous portions of the sentence are not expressing a supernatural idea, neither should this phrase be so interpreted. The commentators who hold that the Hebrew writer believed Melchizedek was a human being sometimes explain the phrase along the following lines: The Hebrew writer is utilizing a rabbinic principle regarding the silence of Scripture. It was a form of exegesis that said, "Whatever is not recorded in Scripture does not exist."⁵⁰ In the presentation of Melchizedek in Genesis 14, nothing is said about his birth or death. Though in fact he was born and eventually died, the Hebrew writer is pointing out that his portrayal in Scripture is that of a being always living. As such he typifies the divine nature of Jesus. To put it another way, what is literarily true of Melchizedek is literally true of Christ.

If this is indeed the Hebrew writer's argument, then one must admit that he employs an illegitimate form of reasoning. There are many Old Testament characters

⁵⁰Williamson, 439. Some scholars designate this as an Alexandrian principle; see Horton, 153-154.

besides Melchizedek whose births and deaths are not mentioned. When the psalmist said in Psalm 110 that the Messiah's priesthood would be likened to Melchizedek's, he could hardly have intended the silence of Scripture regarding Melchizedek's birth and death to be a foretelling of the divine nature of the Messiah.

I do not believe, however, that the above explanation is the correct understanding of the words, "having neither beginning of days nor end of life."⁵¹ First of all, it displays the same inherent exegetical error of the supernatural-being interpretation. Whatever the intended meaning of this phrase is, it clearly stands in conjunction with the previous remarks, "without father, without mother, without genealogy." Therefore, it would go against the logic of hermeneutics to interpret "having neither beginning of days..." in a manner totally unrelated in meaning to what precedes it. If "without father, without mother, without genealogy" are said in the context of genealogical record-keeping, then this phrase should most likely be understood in that same vein. Also, the following phrase, "made like the son of God, he abides a priest forever" (the main thought of the sentence syntactically), is speaking about priesthood which, in the Levitical system, was predicated upon hereditary acquisition. It is only logical to understand "having neither beginning of days nor end of life" in this same priestly context, i.e., having to do with priestly genealogy. The interpretation which says that Melchizedek's lack of a birth-death

⁵¹ J. MacKnight suggests that "beginning of days and end of life" refers to the period of a priest's service, since Num. 4:2-16 says that a Levitical priest's service was to begin at age thirty and end at age fifty. He says that the Hebrew writer is pointing to the fact that Melchizedek's priestly service extended without limitation throughout his lifetime. See J. MacKnight, *Apostolical Epistles* (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1850), 537. This does not seem to me to be a very plausible suggestion. Besides, there is an obstacle when one considers the parallel with the priesthood of Christ: the Hebrew writer clearly presents Christ's priesthood as having a beginning point, viz. the same time that he was installed as king (as Psalm 110 indicated). MacKnight's response that the effects of Christ's priesthood extended throughout all time does not suffice in my opinion.

record typifies the eternal nature of Christ has nothing to do with the priestly/genealogical context.

One important fact seems continually to be overlooked by those who interpret the Hebrew writer in this way. This is not the only place in the epistle where he makes arguments on the basis of what Scripture does not record. In these other cases his arguments from silence are certainly not fanciful, rabbinic exegesis. Later in this same chapter the Hebrew writer makes the logical observation that the absence of any statement by Moses authorizing priests from a tribe other than Levi indicated that Christ was excluded from priestly service under the Mosaic system. It was because of this that he reasoned that the Mosaic Law must have been abrogated. The whole argument in chapter 1 regarding the superiority of Christ over the angels is also an argument based upon the silence of Scripture. There the Hebrew writer makes a very logical and legitimate point that, since the exalted position which the Old Testament ascribed to the Messiah was nowhere ascribed to any angel, then no angel possessed such a position of honor. These other instances in Hebrews where argument is made from the silence of Scripture are not of the rabbinic variety. Are we now to conclude that in 7:3 the writer departs from this mode of legitimate argumentation from the silence of Scripture to employ the fanciful method of the rabbis?

There is another way in which the phrase “having neither beginning of days, nor end of life” can be understood -- one which is far more in keeping with the context of this verse and the chapter as a whole. The three previous phrases in verse 3 all relate to things which one would normally find in a genealogical register: a record of one’s father, a record of one’s mother, a record of one’s genealogical ancestry. A record of these items was a necessary requirement for the Levitical priesthood. But there is one other item that is commonly found in a genealogical register: a record of one’s birth and one’s death. In the Levitical high-priesthood, where right to the office was based upon hereditary succession, genealogical records of the high priest’s birth and death were vital. According to the Law of Moses the high priest was to serve for life, and after his death the office would be assumed by his successor. But with a priesthood like that of Melchizedek, which was not received by right of hereditary succession nor passed on through hereditary succession, such information would be unnecessary. The absence of a record in Scripture regarding the birth and death of Melchizedek was simply another item important to a succession type of priesthood, but one which the Melchizedek priesthood did not require. The Hebrew writer is pointing out that the absence of Melchizedek’s record of birth and death serves to amplify the fact that his priesthood was not one that was passed on to successors. This was the key feature of the Melchizedek priesthood that distinguished it dramatically from the Levitical priesthood.

Yes, the Hebrew writer finds significance in the silence of Scripture, but only because the information Scripture was silent about regarding Melchizedek was information indispensable to the Levitical priesthood. Under that priesthood, there could be no silence regarding heredity or the high priest’s birth and death; genealogical records

had to be meticulously kept to legally legitimize succession. Not so with the Melchizedek priesthood, and therein lies the major point of similarity between the Melchizedek priesthood and the priesthood of Christ. Christ's priesthood was solely his own. He neither inherited it from a predecessor, nor would he pass it on to a successor. The Messiah's priestly role, unattainable under the Mosaic system, was in perfect harmony with Scripture because Psalm 110:4 said he was to be a priest like Melchizedek and not like the Levitical priests.

Verse 8 presents the same type of contrast. There the Hebrew writer notes the dissimilarity of Melchizedek and the priests of Levi because, in contrast with them, "it is testified that he [Melchizedek] lives." The Hebrew writer is referring to the legal requirements of Levitical priesthood as contrasted with that of Melchizedek. He is not saying that the ancient priest-king of Salem never died, but that Scripture never presents Melchizedek as dying and passing on his office to a successor. His priesthood was not of that type. Scripture's portrayal of Melchizedek only as alive, with no account of his death, highlights the fact that his office was not one which required successors; it was carried out solely by that one man himself. So it is with the priesthood of Christ. He will be succeeded by no one, for he himself will fulfill his high priestly role till the end of time (7:23-25).

This leads us to the statement about Melchizedek with which verse 3 culminates: "...but made like the Son of God, he abides a priest perpetually." Melchizedek was called to be a priest *eis to dienekes*, i.e., "perpetually," or "forever." Does the Hebrew writer mean by this statement that Melchizedek is a supernatural being? If so, then he is saying that this supernatural being is still functioning as priest. This would mean that the priest-

king of ancient Jerusalem would still be performing priestly duties even after Christ assumed his priesthood! All of this is illogical and it fits neither the thought of the present chapter nor the rest of the book to interpret it in this manner.

The Hebrew writer's diction needs to be understood in the context of Old Testament concepts. The word "forever" (Heb. *ʿolam*; Gk. *eis ton aiona, eis to dienekes*) is a term of broad usage and does not always denote the idea of unending chronological duration. The Hebrew word may simply speak of "futurity" in an indefinite manner. As such, it is used to mean "during the lifetime," as in Exodus 21:6 ("a slave forever") and Deuteronomy 15:17, ("he shall serve him permanently"). It is used to speak in an indefinite manner of the "continuous existence" of things, such as God's covenant or laws.⁵²

When analyzing the statements made in Psalm 110:4 and Hebrews 7:3 about the priesthoods of Christ and Melchizedek being "forever," most commentators overlook the fact that the Old Testament uses the same terminology with reference to the Levitical priesthood. Note the following passages:

Exodus 29:9--"And they [Aaron's sons] shall have the priesthood by a perpetual [*olam*] statute.

Exodus 40:15--"And you shall anoint them [Aaron's sons] even as you have anointed their fathers, that they may minister as priests to Me; and their anointing shall qualify them for a perpetual [*olam*] priesthood throughout their generations."

Numbers 25:13--"And it shall be for him [Aaron's son Phineas] and his descendants after him, a covenant of a perpetual [*olam*] priesthood."

⁵²*The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1979), 761-762.

1 Chronicles 15:2--"The Lord chose them [Levitical priests]...to minister to Him forever [*olam*]."

1 Chronicles 23:13--"And Aaron was set apart to sanctify him as most holy, he and his sons forever [*olam*]," to burn incense before the Lord, to minister to Him and to bless His name forever [*olam*]."

The above passages provide us with the context in which to interpret Psalm 110:4 and Hebrews 7:3. Just as the Old Testament designated the Levitical priesthood to be "forever" (in the sense of indefinite futurity), Psalm 110 said the same thing about the Messiah's priesthood, and the Hebrew writer the same thing about Melchizedek's priesthood. All three priesthoods could be described appropriately by this language. But the difference between the Levitical priesthood and the other two priesthoods was this: with the Levitical priesthood, it was the *priestly succession* that was promised to be forever. Aaron himself was never promised perpetual priesthood, nor was any one Levitical priest. But the Messiah and Melchizedek were themselves designated priests forever. The point the Hebrew writer is making when he says that Melchizedek abides a priest forever is that Melchizedek personally fulfilled the full duration of that priestly service. He himself was a priest forever, not he and a priestly succession. This precisely foreshadowed the priesthood of the Messiah. The Messiah would personally function as a priest forever, for the full duration of his required service, and never pass on that office to a successor.

In making this point the Hebrew writer is merely drawing out the legitimate implication of Psalm 110:4. Notice the parallelism of the poetry in this verse:

Thou art a priest forever,
After the order of Melchizedek.

The verse is pointing out the similarity between the priesthood of the Messiah and the ancient priest of Salem. We are being short-sighted if we see the correspondence solely in the fact that the Messiah and Melchizedek were both priest-kings. The correspondence extends further. Both the Messiah and Melchizedek were the sole possessors of their priesthoods; they themselves were priests forever and not some priestly lineage they represented. The word “forever” needs to be understood in its common indefinite future sense. In terms of actual chronology, the duration of these two priests’ services would be relative to their respective natures. The priesthood of Melchizedek was his forever, i.e., as long as he lived, and there is no reason to doubt that he lived a normal lifetime. The Messiah’s priesthood is also his forever. But as the Hebrew writer points out in chapter 7, the abiding nature of the Son enables his priesthood to endure throughout the generations so that he might fully meet the intercessory needs of humanity for all time (7:16, 24-25).

There is no reason to think that when the Hebrew writer says Melchizedek “abides a priest perpetually (forever)” he means that his priesthood never ended in point of fact (just as there is no reason to think that the Hebrew writer would have understood the Old Testament statements about the perpetual nature of the Levitical priesthood in such a fashion.) What he is saying is that Melchizedek himself always abided as the priest of the Melchizedek priesthood, never passing the office on to a successor. This was not the case with the priesthood of Aaron, but it was the case with the priesthood of Christ.⁵³

⁵³S. Kistemaker says that “of whom it is witnessed that he liveth” in verse 8 points to Psalm 110 and that the Hebrew writer was trying to argue the perpetual nature of Melchizedek’s priesthood from Psalm 110 (*Exposition of Hebrews*, 123-124). I disagree. Genesis 14 itself offered sufficient testimony regarding the perpetual nature of the Melchizedek priesthood in the sense which the writer intends. Psalm 110 only reflects this. The writer’s purpose in chapter 7 is not to show what the Messiah’s priesthood signified about Melchizedek’s, but what Melchizedek’s priesthood

Another argument in support of the above interpretation is this: if the Hebrew writer is not drawing a parallel in verse 3 between the fact that both Melchizedek and Christ were the sole priests of their respective priesthoods and never passed the office on to successors, then this major point of similarity between the two priests is never brought out anywhere in the chapter. The Hebrew writer does emphasize the fact that neither of them inherited their offices from priestly predecessors. Does it seem reasonable that he would emphasize neither had predecessors, yet fail to mention that neither had successors? The fact that the Messiah was the one and only priest of his priesthood was a major point of similarity with the Melchizedek priesthood, and a major point of dissimilarity with the Levitical priesthood. This point could not have been overlooked.

It is my hope that this paper has demonstrated that the modern criticism of the Hebrew writer's use of Psalm 110 is unjustified criticism. Any apparent problem with his exegesis and argumentation stems from our own failure to properly interpret his statements in the context of priesthood qualifications. G. B. Caird has said, "It is important to recognize that throughout his treatment of Melchizedek our author is concerned solely with the exegesis of Ps. 110. He carries us back to the story of Genesis 14...because he wishes to answer the very modern question: What did the words 'priest forever after the order of Melchizedek' mean to the Psalmist who wrote them?"⁵⁴ It is my hope that we will be able to see clearly how the Hebrew writer answered this question. Far from being a case of improper exegesis and argumentation, the Hebrew writer has

signified about the Messiah's.

⁵⁴Caird, 48.

legitimately and fully brought out the meaning of Psalm 110. What we see in Hebrews 7 is hermeneutics of the highest caliber.