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Melchizedek and the Epistle to the Hebrews

Context, context, context

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Standing-room only

Once for all

Melchizedek and the Epistle to the Hebrews

As a Bible character Melchizedek has a somewhat erratic career. He makes his first appearance in three verses in the story of Abraham, and then disappears for over a thousand years before reappearing in a single verse in one of David's psalms.

He then disappears for another thousand years before taking centre stage through four chapters of the book of Hebrews.

Why does this mysterious character suddenly become prominent in the book of Hebrews? To discover the answer we need to think about the context of Hebrews.

Context, context, context

Strictly speaking the epistle to the Hebrews is anonymous. Different Bible students have their strong opinions but the only definite answer is 'we don't know'. The recipients of the letter are much easier to identify. They are Jewish Christians who are on the verge of defecting back into Judaism.

Nostalgia v Revelation

We have seen that in spite of the confrontations, and epistles and even an inter-church conference in Jerusalem, the Judaizers continued on their mission of trying to make the New Covenant a sub-division of the Old Covenant. There was one weapon that threatened to be the most powerful of all... nostalgia.

The sights and sounds and smells of Herod's temple must have been emotionally intoxicating. The magnificent building, its gilded roof glistening in the sun, the priests and the High Priest in their beautiful vestments, the singing of the choirs, the blowing of ram's horns and silver trumpets. The milling crowds, the scents of scorched flesh and incense, the sense of solemn awe that pervaded the services. How is a house-meeting in a house going to compete with this? It is easy to forget that all the epistles are addressed to 'house-churches'. They 'broke bread' 'from house to house'.

I was once a part of one of these house-churches. No building, no liturgy, no rams' horns or trumpets, no vestments, no fixed services... you had to attend all the meeting to find out where and when the next meeting would be held. There is a delightful Charles Wesley hymn that begins “

1. Happy the souls that first believed,
To Jesus and each other cleaved;
Joined by the unction from above,
In mystic fellowship of love.
2. Meek, simply followers of the Lamb,
They lived, and spake, and thought the same!
Broke the commemorative bread,
And drank the Spirit of their Head.
3. On God, they cast their every care,
Wrestling with God in mighty prayer
They claimed the grace through Jesus given,
By prayer they shut , and opened heaven.
4. To Jesus they performed their vows,
A little church in every house;
They joyfully conspired to raise
Their ceaseless sacrifice of praise.

Those are the first 4 stanzas of an 18 verse hymn. Look it up.

▼ Acts 2:46–47

So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:46–47 NKJV)

The 'pull' of the Temple

The 'pull' of the Temple had a strong attraction to all who had experienced it. It always did have. In the days when the nation split into two nations Jeroboam, king of the house of Israel, knew that the power of the Temple and its worship would be irresistible. He tried to counter it by creating his own holy sites and sacrifices and priesthood. It was his attempt to provide a stronger counter-attraction that led him and his people inevitably into idolatry and disaster.

▼ 1Kings 12:25–27

Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill-country of Ephraim, and dwelt therein; and he went out from thence, and built Penuel. And Jeroboam said in his heart, Now will the kingdom return to the house of David: if this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of Jehovah at Jerusalem, then will the heart of this people turn again unto their lord, even unto Rehoboam king of Judah; and they will kill me, and return to Rehoboam king of Judah. (1Kings 12:25–27 ASV)

Throughout the centuries Christendom has continually developed elaborate rituals and magnificent buildings, often loosely based on the patterns of priesthood and the splendour of the Temple. This was never God's intention and always blurs the vision of the saints.

In the days when the book of Hebrews was written there was a clear perception in the mind of the author that many believers with a Jewish background stood again at a point of decision...

Would they go on or would they turn back?

To make sure there was no possible misunderstanding the writer brings a strong word from the prophecy of Habbakuk;

▼ Heb 10:38-39

Now the just shall live by faith; But if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him." But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. Heb 10:38-39 NKJV.

The writer speaks of the ways that God had spoken in the past and warns them of the danger of neglecting the word of God that has come not through the intermediaries of angels and Moses but from Christ himself.

And he constantly repeats the refrain 'it is better'...

- Christ is better than the angels,
- better than the prophets,
- better than Aaron and his priesthood,
- better than Moses and his service of God.

he declares that...

- Christ has instituted a better covenant,
- which has a better hope
- and is built on better promises.
- Christ's sacrifice is better.
- He is a better mediator. At one point he trawls through great sections of the Old Testament drawing attention to kings and leaders and heroes of faith and ends with the statement; And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise,
- God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us. Heb 11:39-40 NKJV.

The writer's way is to define and describe by way of contrast. Jeremiah had begun his introduction of the New Covenant by contrasting it with the Sinai Covenant and the writer to the Hebrews follows that pattern. The New Covenant is not 'in addition to' but 'different to' and 'a replacement for' the Old Covenant. It is not complementary but a stand-alone covenant that is perfect in its provision.

It is simply 'the better covenant'.

The Priest-King

This is where Melchizedek comes into the story. The author of Hebrews shows that the New Covenant is different 'in kind' to the Old Covenant and part of the way he does this is by contrasting the Levitical Priesthood, the kind of priesthood that Aaron and his sons exercised, with a Melchizedek kind of priesthood.

In the history of the nation there had been a clear division of labour between the kings and the priests.

- The monarchy was provided by the 'house of David' and was descended from Judah, one of Jacob/Israel's sons.
- The priesthood, on the other hand, was provided by the 'house of Levi', and particularly through the family of Aaron.

The priesthood and the crown were thus carefully separated.

In Israel's Biblical history there were no 'priest-kings'. But in Israel's pre-history there was such a priest-king; a man who held, in himself, the twin function of priest and king, but only one such man, and his name was Melchizedek;

▼ Genesis 14:18 ASV

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was priest of God Most High. (Genesis 14:18 ASV)

Melchizedek appears in the story of Abraham without introduction. Like a meteorite he flashes across the scene and is gone almost before we have time to notice him, but he provides another of those shadows and patterns; another colour for our palette.

Melchizedek is a priest-king.

Zechariah's Perplexing Prophecy

Occasionally prophets bringing the word of God, were given messages that must have been quite incomprehensible to them. During the rebuilding of the Temple after the Babylonian return Zechariah and Haggai encouraged the temple builders with their prophecies. On one occasion Zechariah brought a perplexing message;

▼ Zechariah 6:12–13

Thus speaketh Jehovah of hosts, saying, Behold, the man whose name is the Branch: and he shall grow up out of his place; and he shall build the temple of Jehovah; even he shall build the temple of Jehovah; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne; and the counsel of peace shall be between them both. (Zechariah 6:12–13 ASV)

This prophecy was in direct contradiction to all that God had revealed about kings and priests. Kings had thrones, priests 'stood' to serve God. No doubt Zechariah was one of those prophets referred to by Peter who 'enquired and searched diligently' as to the meaning of his prophecy and was told that his words belonged to a later time.

Standing-room only

In the Tabernacle of old and in the Temples that followed there were no seats for the priests. There was only one seat that is usually translated as 'the mercy seat' in our different Bible versions; from that throne God reigned over his people. Later, kings would have thrones, but priests... never.

During his explanations to those being tempted to be drawn back into Judaism and the Old Covenant the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews refocuses his readers' attention on his main point;

▼ Heb 8:1

Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, Heb 8:1 NKJV.

In Zechariah a priest is found sitting on a throne; this cannot possibly be a Levitical priest. It is an entirely different kind of priest, a priest like Melchizedek.

He also makes the point that Levitical priests stood to their work and that it had to be repeated day after day. In the symbolism of the shadow and pattern, there was no rest for the priests, not even on the Sabbath. Christ however is a different kind of priest;

Once for all

▼ Heb 10:11-13 NKJV.

And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. Heb 10:11-13 NKJV.

There is the stark difference; the Old Covenant had standing priests, the New Covenant has a sitting priest.

He also makes the point that the blood of animal sacrifices could never, in its own power, take away sins. Sins were remitted, released, in the Old Covenant but the basis of that remission was never the value of the animal sacrifice but was based on the value of the sacrifice of Christ;

▼ Heb 9:23

Therefore it was necessary that the copies of the things in the heavens should be purified with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. Heb 9:23 NKJV.

Symbolically their blood cleansed the earthly sanctuaries but they were only shadows and patterns of the coming Lamb whose 'once for ever' sacrifice has always been and will always be the legal basis on which God remits sin.

This is the same truth that Paul declares in his epistle to the saints in Rome;

▼ Rom 3:24-25

...Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, Rom 3:24-25 NKJV.

Why is the writer going to such lengths to show that Christ's kind of priest-king priesthood is better than the Levitical priesthood headed up by Aaron? We will have to wait until our next time together on biblebase's Broken Bread studies on 'the better covenant - revisited'...

based on... Bailey, Ron. The Better Covenant. Chapter 21 - Kindle Edition.