

Hebrews

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Hebrews 7 - Introduction

Introduction

- Here we enter into a part of the sermon where the line of reasoning seems to modern readers to be confusing to say the least. The problem for us is that we do know or understand the way the rabbis reasoned out the Scripture in the ancient world, so before we get into the text we will need to take a look at how the ancient interpreters were taught to think about how to understand God’s word.
- In Ch. 5:1-10, the preacher lays out the role of the High Priest and how Jesus is that perfect High Priest as both priest and sacrifice. He builds on the idea here, but qualifies who the High Priest is by saying that Christ comes in the order of Melchizedek.
- Now to unpack this we start by understanding that to the preacher religion in general is access to God. If your religion requires following thousands of rules or costly sacrifice, you are doing so in order to earn or buy access to God, either for blessing or to appease. For the Jew, both of these were in play. There was the Law, whereby if you kept the Law you were a friend of God who’s door would be open to you. And there was also sacrifice, because people proved incapable of keeping the Law. Thus the priesthood was required along with the whole sacrificial system. The Latin word for priest is “pontifex” which literally means “bridgebuilder”. Thus the priest was the one who stood as a bridge between a Holy God and sinful, fallen humanity. Here the idea is that by means of sacrifice, the breaking of the law is atoned for, forgiven, and the fellowship with God restored.
- But in the hearts of everyone prior to the coming of Jesus, all of that may have sounded good on paper and in theory, but in practice the weight of sin still pervaded everyone’s life. This is why a new, perfect High Priest was needed and a new and truly effective sacrifice required. In Jesus Christ the preacher finds the one and only High Priest who can truly open the door to God and restore the divine relationship that was broken by our sin.

- He bases all of this on two passages, Psalm 110:4 and Genesis 14:17-20. As the preacher looks at these two passages, he does so in the traditional method of the rabbis, and this is where we can get a bit lost trying to follow him. To better understand, we turn to William Barclay:
 - “To the scholarly Jew any passage of scripture had four meanings to which he gave four different names: (a) First, there was Peshat, which is the literal and factual meaning. (b) Second, there was Remaz, which is the suggested meaning. (c) Third, there was Derush, which is the meaning arrived at after long and careful investigation. (d) Fourth, there was Sod, which is the allegorical or inner meaning. To the Jew the most important meaning by far was Sod, the inner meaning. He was not nearly so much interested in the factual meaning of a passage as in the allegorical and mystical meaning which could be extracted from it, even (if) it might have no connection whatever with the literal meaning. It was quite permissible, and in fact the regular practice, to take things right out of their context and read into them meanings which we would consider fantastic and quite unjustified. That is what the writer to the Hebrews is doing here.
 - (ii) Second, it is essential to note that the Jewish interpreters considered themselves completely justified in arguing not only from the utterances but also from the silences of scripture. An argument could be built, not only on what scripture said but also on what it did not say. In fact the writer to the Hebrews bases his argument in this passage at least as much on what scripture did not say about Melchizedek as on what it did.”

- What the preacher then wants to us see out of all this is that the priesthood of Melchizedek is far superior to the traditional priesthood of Aaron. 1) Melchizedek comes to us in scripture with no genealogy. Scripture is silent on where he came from. But for the Jews in the Great Temple, to be a priest you had to present a genealogy dating back to Aaron himself! So Melchizedek was a priest of God based on his character and faith, whereas for the priests of the Great Temple those things were purely secondary to a good genealogy. 2) Genesis tells us Melchizedek was the King of Salem. The name Melchizedek literally means King of Righteousness and Salem means Peace. Put it all together and Melchizedek is the King of Righteousness and Peace. Further, again drawing on the silence of scripture, the Word does not tell us

when Melchizedek began or ended his priesthood, so his priesthood must be eternal, with no beginning or end.

- To sum up: the priesthood of Melchizedek is a priesthood of righteousness; is a priesthood of peace; is a royal priesthood; is personal, not inherited; is eternal.
- Finally then, how much more is the priesthood of Melchizedek superior to the priesthood of Aaron found in the Temple? First, Genesis tells us that Abraham surrendered his tithe to Melchizedek, demonstrating that Melchizedek represented something and someone greater than Father Abraham himself. Second, Melchizedek blessed Abraham. Blessings always come from the top down. The superior one blesses the subordinate. Given that it was Abraham who founded the Jews as a unique and separate people, as well as being one with unmatched promises from God, for Abraham to place himself in submission to Melchizedek speaks to Melchizedek's supremacy.
- After all of this, it is easy to see how the preacher makes the step to proclaiming Jesus as the ultimate High Priest. He is the King of Righteousness and Peace. He is eternal. He is who He is not only because He can trace His lineage back to Abraham through David as Matthew 1 shows, but simply by who He is internally by means of His relationship to God The Father.