

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY IN THE BOOK OF HEBREWS – PART SEVEN

The Jews it seems were locked into a way of thinking about the high priest and the law of Moses which prevented them grasping the good news of Jesus. They could only think of a high priest descended from Aaron, animal sacrifices offered over and over again, and rules which were mostly about what they should not do. The writer of this book sees the story of Melchizedek as a way of lifting their understanding to a new level without denying what had gone before.

While the Israelites were by definition descendants of Israel, first known as Jacob, they had a far greater admiration for Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, and prided themselves on being his sons.(Lk.3:8; Jn.8:53) Rightly Abraham was remembered as a man of outstanding faith. The writer draws on the account of one man who was used by God to lift and establish the faith of Abraham. Melchizedek entered Abraham's life at a critical point. Abraham had just shown great faith and courage by pursuing with only 318 men, almost certainly with no military experience, a large army who had kidnapped his nephew Lot. Because he believed God, he was given victory and accomplished his objective of freeing Lot. At the same time he was also needing to deal with the king of Sodom who wanted to make a bargain with him. Sodom had a reputation for moral depravity from which Abraham needed to stand firmly apart. Melchizedek's ministry to Abraham reminded him clearly that God, not Abraham, had just won this victory. The absence of information about Melchizedek's age and ancestors, the meaning of his name and his title as king of Salem show a powerful similarity to Jesus. Some people suggest that Melchizedek was actually an appearance of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament like the time He appeared to Abraham with 2 angels in Gen.18, because of the statements about him here in verse 3. It is probably safer just to go as far as seeing him as a picture of Jesus, as for example Isaac is explained to be in Heb.11:19 where he is described 'as a type' of Christ.(7:1-3)

Abraham recognized Melchizedek's greatness as a priest of God by the tithe he gave him, one tenth of the spoils of battle. The Levites, who were later under the law told to collect a tithe from the Israelites, were, as descendants of Abraham, part of Abraham and thus were part of his acknowledgement of the greatness of Melchizedek. Melchizedek foreshadowed Jesus and therefore the Levites were also looking to Jesus Christ as greater than themselves.(7:4-10)

The law of the Old Testament first given to Moses was a good and necessary start, like a school teacher in the life of a child,(Gal.3:24) but it had weaknesses. There were many Levites because they were human, sinned and died. Even the high priest kept having to be replaced and he too was a sinner. The sacrifices had to be offered over and over again because they provided only a temporary answer to sin. The law dealt only with the outside of a person. The real problem was in the heart. The purpose of the law was not to make men good but to show them how incapable they were of being good of themselves and therefore their need of Jesus Christ. God right through the Old Testament kept promising that a better solution was coming. Jesus was not a Levite because they

were not the better way. God made a new beginning which He had foreshadowed in the relationship between Abraham who was Levi's greater ancestor, and Melchizedek who was greater even than Abraham. To indicate to the Israelites how serious He was about providing a better law, God used an oath, a solemn promise of which Jesus was the fulfillment.(7:11-24)

God's promised answer would be the Son of God, a High Priest forever, pictured by Melchizedek, eternal, sinless and therefore able to be the sacrifice for the sin of all of us and then enter the presence of the Father on our behalf forever. When something inadequate and temporary is replaced by something so much better, why would we want to hang on to the inferior version? When we trade an old car in for a shiny new one, why would we want to keep the old one instead? When we try to hold on to law as the way to be right with God for ourselves and for those around us instead of gratefully embracing the grace of God this is the mistake we are making. That is not very smart!(7:25-28)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What glimpses were there in the story of Melchizedek in Genesis 14 of the future coming of Jesus as the new High Priest? How did Ps.110 provide the link between Melchizedek and Jesus even in the Old Testament? Was Melchizedek actually Jesus or simply a picture of Jesus? Compare this story with others where Jesus appeared in the Old Testament or was symbolized in people's lives.(verses 1-3)
2. What reasons does the writer use to make his point about who was greatest, Melchizedek, Abraham or Levi? What did they do which proved his argument? Why does he go to such trouble about what was really just a technical matter? What grounds might this passage provide for teaching on tithing today?(verses 4-10)
3. What was inadequate about the Old Testament law? What did God replace it with? Why was exchanging Aaron as the high priest for Jesus a necessary first step in doing this? Why should the Jews have been expecting this to happen and welcoming it? If Christians are priests alongside the new High Priest how does all this affect our lives today?(verses 11-24)
4. What did Jesus do for us which no earlier high priest could do? What fitted Him to be able to play this role? How did this change the functioning of the temple, the priests and the sacrifices? How therefore is our relationship with God so much better than was possible in the Old Testament? How would you try to explain this to a Jew today?(verses 25-28)