

Hebrews 7:1–8:13: Better Priesthood, Better Covenant (Part 1)

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Session 7a

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Abstract

This session analyzes Hebrews 7:1–8:13, focusing on the theological significance of Jesus' priestly mediation in the line of Melchizedek and its superiority over the Levitical priesthood. Dr. deSilva explains how Jesus' eternal qualifications—established on an indestructible life rather than physical descent—necessitate a new, superior covenant that can achieve "perfection" by cleansing the human conscience. The session also explores the historical and theological background of Second Temple Jewish martyr theology, demonstrating how voluntary death was understood as an atoning sacrifice of obedience that provides a vital conceptual framework for understanding Christ's death.

Outline

I. Introduction to Jesus' Priestly Mediation (Hebrews 7:1–10:18)

A. Drilling down on topics raised in Heb 2:17-18 and Heb 4:16–5:10

B. Four core questions of the central section:

1. What is the significance of being a high priest in the line of Melchizedek, and what qualifies Jesus?
2. What are the consequences of the Melchizedek priesthood for the Aaronic priesthood and old covenant?
3. What is the significance of Jesus' death and ascension as a priest of Melchizedek?
4. What are the consequences for those who approach God through Jesus' mediation?

C. Scope of Chapters 7 and 8: Addressing the first two questions

II. Ancient Rhetorical Strategies of Praise (Encomium)

A. Ancestry Comparison: Dwell on the dignity of ancestors (Levi vs. Melchizedek) to demonstrate a more distinguished line

B. Comparison with figures of worth: Jesus compared to angels, Moses, and Levitical priests to stress His superior honor

III. The Shadowy Figure of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:1–3; Genesis 14:14–20)

A. Psalm 110:4: "You are a priest forever in the line of Melchizedek"

B. Genesis 14 narrative background: Melchizedek of Salem, priest of God Most High, blesses Abraham and receives a tenth of the spoils

C. Theological pointers through etymology:

1. Melchizedek = King of Righteousness
2. King of Salem = King of Peace
3. Both characteristics are hallmarks of the Messiah and the Messianic kingdom (Isaiah 9:6-7, Isaiah 32:16-17)

D. Theological pointers through literary silences:

1. "Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life"
- 2. Principle of scriptural silence:** What is omitted in Genesis is treated as deliberate to type the Son of God
3. Contrasted with Levitical requirements: Strict genealogical verification (e.g., Ezra/Nehemiah)

E. Define the basis of Melchizedek's order:

1. Priesthood based on preexistence and eternal existence
- 2. Jesus' preexistence (Heb 1:1-4)** and eternal existence (Heb 1:10-12)
3. Jesus' office held "on the basis of an indestructible life" (Heb 7:16)
- 4. The advantage of an endless life:** Jesus always lives to make intercession, unlike mortal Levitical priests who are interrupted by death (Heb 7:23-25)

IV. The Superiority of Melchizedek over Abraham and Levi (Hebrews 7:4–10)

A. The Thesis: Melchizedek is greater than Abraham and Levi, and thus His priesthood is superior (Heb 7:4)

B. Abraham's Tithe: Giving a tenth of the spoils as acknowledging a superior priestly mediator

C. Contrast with Levitical Tithing:

1. Levites command tithes from brothers (equals) based on genealogy (Numbers 18:21)

2. Melchizedek, without pedigree, tithed Abraham (who held the promises) and blessed him

3. Axiom: The inferior party is blessed by the superior party (Heb 7:7)

D. Contrast of Mortality:

1. Levitical priests who receive tithes are mortal men
2. It is testified of Melchizedek that "he lives" (representing an immortal being)

E. Levi's Tithe "Through Abraham":

1. Levi, still in the loins of his ancestor Abraham, paid tithes to Melchizedek
2. The Levitical priesthood is secondary and ultimately dependent on Melchizedek's priesthood

V. Perfection, Law, and Chronology (Hebrews 7:11–19)

A. The Meaning of "Perfection" (Teleiosis):

1. Cleansing the conscience from the defilement of sin to approach God face-to-face
2. Entrance into the ultimate eternal realm (the heavenly temple)
3. Earthly sacrifices/law could not perfect the conscience (Heb 9:1-10)

B. Inclusio of Perfection: Surrounding Heb 7:11 ("perfection were through Levitical priesthood") and Heb 7:19 ("law perfected nothing")

C. Argument from Chronology:

- 1. Psalm 110:4** (written by David) occurs hundreds of years after the Levitical law was established
2. The announcement of a new priestly line implies the failure of the Levitical line to achieve perfection

D. Interconnectedness of Law and Priesthood:

1. Law given on the basis of the Levitical priesthood; they are inextricably linked
2. Changing the priesthood necessitates a change of the law (Heb 7:12)

E. Decisive Proofs of a Changed Priesthood/Law:

- 1. Tribal deviation:** Jesus descended from Judah, a tribe with no priestly authorization from Moses
- 2. Resurrection:** Jesus' resurrection bears witness to "the power of an indestructible life"

F. Results: Setting aside the weak and useless old commandment, and introducing a better hope to draw near to God (Heb 7:18-19)

VI. Jesus as the Guarantor of a Better Covenant (Hebrews 7:20–25)

A. The Role of a Guarantor: Reliability of a covenant depends on the guarantor's reliability (Heb 7:22)

B. Considerations Establishing Jesus' Guarantor Status:

1. The Divine Oath: Unlike Aaronic priests, Jesus is appointed with an oath ("The Lord has sworn and will not repent," Psalm 110:4), showing God's unchangeable will

2. Enduring and Uninterrupted Office: Jesus holds the priesthood without interruption because He abides forever, unlike mortal priests who are replaced upon death

C. Historical Context:

1. Anxieties over high-priestly succession in the Second Temple period (e.g., Hellenizing high priests: Jason, Menelaus, Alcimus)

2. Hopes for a stable, immortal high priest (e.g., Testament of Levi 18)

D. Theological Benefit: Jesus is always able to rescue and intercede for those drawing near to God

VII. Recapitulation: The Fitting High Priest (Hebrews 7:26–28)

A. Character of the High Priest: Holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens

B. Separation vs. Solidarity: Balance of Jesus' sympathetic solidarity with His complete access to and proximity with God

C. Nature of Sacrifice: Once-for-all self-offering vs. repetitive Levitical offerings (which require priests to sacrifice for their own sins first)

D. The Three-Fold Antithesis of Heb 7:28:

1. Word of the Oath (personal vow, infallible) vs. Torah (broken covenant)

2. The Son of the household (guaranteed access and success) vs. Ordinary weak men

3. Eternal perfection vs. Human weakness and mortality

E. Rhetorical Aim: Encourage the Christian minority to endure, reorienting them toward eschatological deliverance

VIII. Theological Background: Voluntary Death as Atoning Sacrifice (Hebrews 8 Preview)

A. Context: Human sacrifice is forbidden by the Torah, but voluntary noble death was valued in Greco-Roman culture

B. Indigenous Jewish Developments in the Second Temple Period:

1. Leviticus 17:11: Blood as the seat of life making atonement (life for life)

2. Rationalization/Metaphorization: God's preference for praise, contrition, and obedience over animal sacrifices (Psalm 51:16-17, Psalm 141:2)

3. Deuteronomy Covenant Theology: Obedience reverses curses and restores blessings (Deut 27-32)

C. Historical Focus: The Hellenizing Crisis (168–166 BC)

1. Priestly elites (such as Jason/Yeshua) remaking Jerusalem into a Greek city, setting aside the Torah
2. Antiochus IV's direct religious persecution and the choice faced by righteous Jews (eating pork vs. torture and death)

D. Martyr Theology in Apocryphal Literature:

1. 2 Maccabees: Deaths of martyrs viewed as offerings of obedience that turn God's wrath to favor

2. 4 Maccabees: Sacrificial/cultic language used explicitly (martyrs as a "ransom for sins" and "atoning sacrifice"; Eleazar's prayer)

E. Isaiah 53 (Suffering Servant) as a Scriptural Precursor:

1. Vicarious atonement through the humiliation and death of a righteous figure
2. Celebrates the final victory and efficacy of the servant's obedience

F. Synthesis:

1. Atonement occurs not through physical blood alone, but through obedience unto death (representative obedience)
2. This rich theological background provided early Christians with the tools to conceptualize Jesus' death as a perfect atoning sacrifice of obedience