

A PRIEST IN THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK”: THE USE OF PSALM 110 IN HEBREWS 7 AND THE IDENTITY OF THE AFRICAN CATHOLIC PRIEST

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Abstract

The presence of so many Old Testament citations in the New Testament demonstrates the continuity of divine revelation in both testaments while also emphasizing the novelty of the New Testament. This can be seen in the theological development of priesthood from the Old Testament to the New Testament, as illustrated by the reference to Psalm 110 in Hebrews 7. In recent years, there has been a flood of critical questions about the meaning of the Catholic priesthood and its continued viability. This has rekindled interest in the biblical understanding of the priesthood and its identity. The understanding of Jesus Christ's priestly identity and how that priesthood relates to actual priestly practice is central to the current questions. It has long been customary to refer to an individual Catholic priest as a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek (see Ps. 110:4). This Psalm is used by the author of Hebrews in his argument about Jesus' Priesthood (Heb. 5:6). According to the mainline traditional Old Testament Israelite priesthood, as represented by the Aaronic-Levitical order, Jesus is not qualified for the priesthood. So he uses this Psalm in his argument, anchoring Jesus' priesthood on Melchizedek's. This article examines the nature of Christ's unique priesthood, which is said to be in the order of Melchizedek, using narrative critical analysis of biblical exegesis.

Keywords: Priesthood, Priest, Melchizedek, Catholic

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a flood of critical questions about the meaning of the Catholic priesthood and its continued viability. This has rekindled interest in the biblical understanding of the priesthood.¹ The presence of so many Old Testament citations in the New Testament demonstrates the continuity of divine revelation in both testaments while also emphasizing the novelty of the New Testament. This can be seen in the theological development of priesthood from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Psalm 110 and Hebrews 7 are examples of this.

¹ Luke Ijezie, Unpublished Paper on “The Priestly Ministry of Melchizedek in Gen 14:18-20 and the Higher Ministry of Jesus in Heb. 7:1-8:6,” CIWA-Port Harcourt, 2021, 1.

While many people are misinformed about the Melchizedekian priesthood, some Christians are perplexed by the enigmatic figure Melchizedek. Melchizedek remains a mystery even to the most ardent Biblical scholars. His name appears only twice in the Bible (see Gen. 14:18; Ps. 110:4). He appears on the scene in Genesis 14 only to vanish as quickly as he appeared—in the span of three verses (Gen. 14:18-20). Nonetheless, the Melchizedekian priesthood, not the Aaronic, is essential to David's messianic hope and Christ's saving work (see Ps. 110:4; Heb. 7).

Some critical scholars deny Davidic authorship of Psalm 110 and attempt to interpret it by reconstructing the historical events surrounding Israel's monarchy's rise. According to them, Ps. 110 was politically charged because it attempted to unite Jerusalem's Jebusite cult with the Israelite monarchy. As a result, Melchizedek's appearance in the Genesis narrative had to be redacted during the Davidic period to connect the Jebusite priest-king Melchizedek with Abraham, the father of Israel.²

Conservative scholarship, on the other hand, has emphasized typological connections between Melchizedek, David, and Jesus, correctly understanding the psalm as a prophetic announcement of a future Messiah who will hold the office of priesthood permanently.³ However, a robust biblical-theological development of how Ps. 110:4 fits into the storyline of Scripture is frequently lacking in treatments of Ps. 110. Ps. 110:4 appears to be an unexplainable anomaly that makes sense only as an act of new special revelation, even to those who accept Davidic authorship and the unity of the Bible. M.J. Paul, for example, writes, “At a moment the Lord revealed to David—how we do not know—that one of David's descendants should be a priest.”⁴ Similarly, John Aloisi suggests that when writing Psalm 110, David may have received a “new revelation” about the Messiah's priesthood.⁵ Such suggestions highlight the importance of considering Psalm 110 and the Melchizedekian priesthood.

Psalm 110

It's common to refer to Psalm 110 as a “royal hymn.” This theory is held by a sizable group of academics who think the psalm shows David being crowned. Instead of connecting the psalm to the actions of the human Davidic ruler, they chose to interpret it as eschatological and messianic. The psalm does, however, contain “a

² John A. Emerton, “Riddle of Genesis XIV,” *VT* 21, no. 4 (October 1, 1971): 28.

³ Examples include Eugene H. Merrill, “Royal Priesthood: An Old Testament Messianic Motif,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 23.1 (2019), 80; Bruce K. Waltke, “Psalm 110: An Exegetical and Canonical Approach,” in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.* (ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffrey C. Waddington; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 60–85; All of these works provide insightful treatments of Psalm 110 that assume Davidic authorship and the unity and integrity of the Bible.

⁴ M.J. Paul, “The Order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4 and Heb 7:3),” *WTJ* 49.1 (1987): 195-211.

⁵ John Aloisi, “Who Is David's Lord? Another Look at Psalm 110:1,” *DBSJ* no. 10 (2005): 119-20.

solemn guarantee of the king's hallowed place in Yahweh's intentions.”⁶ The Jebusite priest-king dynasty now had a divinely chosen successor, but unlike them, his power was not going to be overthrown. He inherited the position of a priest of the Most High God from his Jebusite forebears, serving as a holy intermediary between God and His people.

In other words, David or the psalm's author portrayed David's ascension to the Jebusite monarchy in Jerusalem, a throne that a previous king-priest had sat on. Melchizedek served as a king-priest of Jerusalem during the reign of Abraham, and he was most likely succeeded by a line of king-priests that Moses did not mention in the Genesis account. Melchizedek was most likely a Jebusite or one of their ancestors. As a result, when David assumed the role of king-priest, he wrote, “The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek,” keeping in mind God's promise in 2 Sam. 7:13, 16 to establish his throne for all time (Ps. 110:4). Although cited in Hebrews as “a testimony to his eternal priesthood,”⁷ claims that the psalm is messianic because it is “a primary witness to the heavenly elevation of the ascended and resurrected Christ.”

It's crucial to understand how Melchizedek is used in the Psalms. 1) Melchizedek served as a king-priest of Jerusalem during Abraham's lifetime. 2) David took control of Jerusalem after Jebusite king-priests had ruled there before him. 3) God assured David that if his offspring remained faithful to Him, his throne would be established for all time. The reason David said, “The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek,” is possible because of this (Ps. 110:4). However, this assertion is Messianic in light of: 1) The rest of the psalm's Messianic undertone. 2) David wasn't an ordained priest. 3) The use of Psalm 110:4 by the author of the letter to the Hebrew, confirms its Messianic nature. 4) God Himself made a vow, which is unusual in the Scripture.

“Melchizedek” in the Letter to the Hebrew

This section illustrates how the author of the letter uses both Old Testament narratives to describe Jesus as a Priest in the line of Melchizedek in the book of Hebrews. It goes on to discuss the merits of the Christ priesthood before summarizing its qualities.

Jesus: A Priest after the Order of Melchizedek

In the book of Hebrews, Melchizedek is mentioned for the third time in the entire Bible and only once in the New Testament. This section of the Bible contains more Scripture about this figure than the Old Testament does, and it also does so in greater detail.

⁶ Leslie Allen, *World Biblical Commentary (Vol. 21)*(Waco, TX: Word Books,1983), 86-87.

⁷ Allen, 85.

However, it is hard to discuss Melchizedek without also bringing up Jesus, as Melchizedek was specifically brought up in Hebrews to clarify and describe Christ's priesthood. However, it is hard to discuss Melchizedek without also bringing up Jesus, as Melchizedek was specifically brought up in Hebrews to clarify and describe Christ's priesthood. "While the entire argument may seem obscure to modern readers, it was compelling to first-century Jewish Christians who were struggling to justify their rejection of Judaism and who could see in this discussion evidence that the high priesthood of Jesus is biblically defensible and demonstrably superior to that of the OT."⁸ David's statement in Ps. 110:4, "The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, you are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek," is quoted by the letter's author. He uses these terms four times (Heb. 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:21), indicating that they have messianic overtones. In fact, Hebrews is the only place in the New Testament where Jesus is referred to as our "Great High Priest." It is clear that the author saw in Melchizedek a flawless image of Christ since, as Ellen White writes, "it was Christ that spoke through Melchizedek, the priest of the Most High God. Melchizedek was not Christ, but he was the voice of God in the world, the representative of the Father."⁹

Since Melchizedek "illustrates the superiority of Christ's priesthood to Aaron's priesthood," Melchizedek "becomes the pattern of the Messiah's priesthood."¹⁰ The events in Genesis and the prophecy in Psalms show how Melchizedek's name—"king of righteousness"—his place of residence—"peace"—Salem—his life—"without birth or death"—his ordination—"with an oath"—his office—"both priest and king"—and his functions—"a bestower of blessings and a receiver of tithes"—all surpass those of Aaron. Nearly by accident, but yet noteworthy, Christ (in Melchizedek) is also superior to Levi (Heb. 7:5, 8) and Abraham (Heb. 7:4,6).

The superiority of the Priesthood of Jesus

Even though Jesus was obviously not a member of the Aaronic priestly family, the letter viewed Him as the "Great High Priest" and had no trouble referring to Him as such. The issue, though, was in the hearts of the populace. Paul found it extremely challenging to make a case for the truth that the Jews, who took great pleasure in their Levitical priesthood, would accept.

According to the epistle evidently intended to speak of Jesus as a magnificent, gracious High Priest—One who is delightfully patient with all of our human flaws because He was in all respects tempted like we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15). But

⁸ *The Global Concise Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Global Christian Publishers, 1999), 378.

⁹ Ellen White, "Melchizedek" *Review and Herald*, Feb. 18, 1890, 110.

¹⁰ W. Broomall, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1960), 348.

how could Jesus of Nazareth, who didn't come from a line of priests, be a High Priest or even a regular, everyday priest? Jesus was born into the royal family of David, which came from the tribe of Judah and not even from the tribe of Levi, to say nothing of the family of Aaron. The Jewish people were all aware that only the descendants of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi, could serve as priests. Therefore, Jesus' ancestry disqualified Him from the priesthood in the eyes of the Jews.¹¹

The letter and others who wanted to explain Jesus' nature and mission ran into trouble because of His lineage.¹² If Jesus was not a descendant of Aaron or Levi, how could Paul explain Christ's priesthood and make explicit the mission of Jesus? How could His holding of the high priestly ministry be justified in a way that would reassure people who might be skeptical about His ancestry? The letter searched for a different priesthood to complement the Aaronic one and providently found this requirement met in the priesthood of the godly king of the ancient Canaanite city of Salem.

Richard Likte opines that Melchizedek is depicted in the Old Testament as a legitimate high priest who served in the name of the real God and even ruled as king over the pagan city of Salem. Melchizedek existed long before either Aaron or his forefather Levi was born; he was not related to the family of Aaron of the tribe of Levi. And even Abraham, who was the ancestor of Aaron and Levi, gave Melchizedek tithes. According to Likte, “the mysteries surrounding that order of priests were sufficient to negate any criticism of that conclusion” when referring to the priesthood of Melchizedek.¹³ Therefore, just as Melchizedek had a higher priesthood than the Levites had, so does Jesus, making them both priests. Furthermore, rather than being passed down through the lineage, their appointment was personally handed to them by God Himself. There isn't much discussion of the qualities of Melchizedek's priesthood, but Jesus' priesthood was nevertheless superior to it even though it came before the Aaronic priesthood and was superior to Melchizedek's.

Melchizedek resembled *aphōmoiōménos* (Son of God) according to Heb. 7:3. The word *aphomnoiōō* always assumes two unique and separate identities, one of which is a copy of the other.¹⁴ Melchizedek's priesthood was a reflection of Christ's priestly qualities, just as the Aaronic priesthood was a shadow of his priestly service. Melchizedek was merely a reflection of Christ; he was not the real original. Melchizedek was therefore made by Christ and for the sake of serving Him since He is not Christ. The fact that Melchizedek's priesthood was an earthly one in an earthly

¹¹ Richard Likte, *What Jesus Really Meant* (Canada: Pacific Press, 2011), 76.

¹² Likte, 77.

¹³ Likte, 78.

¹⁴ D. Burdick, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Vol. 3)(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 313.

city whereas Jesus' priesthood is celestial serves as more proof of Christ's superiority to Melchizedek. Jesus brings a new covenant, ministers in the heavenly temple, and offers Himself as the ideal sacrifice once and for all.

The Greatness of Melchizedek Over Abraham

The epistle to the Hebrews contains several arguments for why Christ's priesthood, which is modeled after Melchizedek's, is superior to the Levitical Priesthood. Melchizedek's priesthood was superior to the Levitical priesthood because he was greater than Abraham, Levi, and the Levitical priests, as shown by the author in his first attempt to explain why the priesthood of Jesus is superior to the Levitical priesthood. The author consequently uses Melchizedek as an illustration, to show that the Levitical Priesthood was neither the first nor the greatest and that a priesthood superior to it might have existed.

The Tithe Offering of Abraham

In the Genesis account, Abraham gave Melchizedek tithes, as the text mentions. Because even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the spoils, the author argues, "consider how mighty this man was" (Heb. 7:2, 4). Jewish scholars were perplexed by Melchizedek's splendor.¹⁵ Melchizedek was more significant than the patriarch, as evidenced by the fact that Abraham paid tithes to him and received his blessing from him. Melchizedek was greater to Abraham only because Abraham had sent tithes to him:

And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to collect tithes from the people, that is, from their kindred, though these also are descended from Abraham; But this man, who does not belong to their ancestry, collected tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had received the promises; It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.¹⁶

By bringing forth a few points, the author's letter demonstrates Melchizedek's superiority over the Levitical priests. He points out that the Levitical priests tithe their own brethren, or their fellow Jews, as the first point. The second point is that they operate in this way as a result of legislation. In contrast, Melchizedek tithed Abraham, who had no racial ties to him and was the creator of the Jewish nation.¹⁷ He also did not demand the tithes because the law permitted him to do so; instead, he did so because he had an undeniable personal right. The third argument is that whereas Melchizedek, who stands in for Christ, is shown to be alive, the priests who collected

¹⁵ Burdick, 313.

¹⁶ Heb. 7:5-7.

¹⁷ Barclay, 69.

tithes were mortal. Christ has immortality, in contrast to the mortal priesthood. And for the fourth argument, Paul argues that while Levi was still in Abraham's womb, he gave tithes to Melchizedek, from whom the priests descended. Just as he can state that Levi received tithes (in the person of his descendants), says that he can also claim that Levi paid tithes (in the person of his ancestor).¹⁸

Therefore, Melchizedek was greater than Abraham for he received the tithes of Abraham the patriarch who is greater than his descendants. Melchizedek was also greater than Levi because Levi paid tithes to him in Abraham. Melchizedek was also greater than the Levitical priests because they exacted tithes by legal enactment but he did so because it was his right given him by God and not by any man or law. Also, he possessed immortality while the Levitical priests were mere mortals, this though is about Jesus. In like manner, all who claim to be Christians pay tithes because they acknowledge that all belongs to Christ.

Melchizedek Blessed Abraham

Melchizedek “met Abraham... and blessed him” after Abraham had returned from rescuing Lot and the five kings of the Dead Sea valley from Chedorlaomer and his three allies (see Heb. 7:1). Melchizedek “blessed him that had the promises,” according to the letter to the Hebrews. And there is no contradiction: the less, the better (see Heb. 7:6-7). Or, to put it another way, the superior favors the lesser. Consequently, Melchizedek was superior to Abraham, even though Abraham was the patriarch, the founder of the Jewish nation, and the recipient of God's promises.¹⁹

In addition, Barclay remarks that “in light of what we know, (it) seems so sacramental” about Melchizedek's offering of “bread and wine” to Abraham and his host. They were Melchizedek's gift to God's chosen man, Abraham, and they serve as a metaphor for Jesus' offering of himself—his own life—to humanity during the Lord's Supper. This is the greatest gift humanity has ever received since it grants us eternal life and reestablishes our relationship with the Father.²⁰

Characteristics of the Priesthood of Jesus

After demonstrating Melchizedek's superiority over Abraham and the Levitical priesthood, the letter to the Hebrews then lists the various characteristics of Christ's priesthood that are similar to those of Melchizedek. While some of these characteristics do not resemble those of Melchizedek, they nonetheless demonstrate that Christ's priesthood is vastly superior to the Levitical priesthood. The qualities

¹⁸ Edward Fudge, *Our Man in Heaven* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker. 1973), 72.

¹⁹ Fudge, 71.

²⁰ Barclay, 72.

that Paul lists are as follows:

i. Double Offices

Being of the tribe of Judah rather than the priestly tribe of Levi disqualified Jesus from holding the office of priest in the eyes of the Jews because only members of the tribe of Judah were permitted to hold the office of king. However, Paul the letter claims that Jesus is not of the levitical order of priesthood but rather is “after the order of Melchizedek.” Melchizedek served as both the Priest of the Most High God and the king of Salem. As a result, Melchizedek's role included both being a king and a priest. In a similar vein, Jesus being of the royal tribe of Judah was both king and Priest.

The Melchizedek Kingship is now fascinating. First, according to the meaning of His name, which is “king of righteousness” (see Heb. 7:2); and secondly, due to his place of residence, Salem. If this symbolism is to be taken literally, Melchizedek was the king of Jerusalem. He resembles the Son of God, as seen above, and unlike Melchizedek, whose priesthood was earthly, Christ's priesthood was heavenly. As Melchizedek was the King of the earthly Jerusalem, Jesus is the King of the heavenly or New Jerusalem (see Rev. 3:12, 21). However, Salem also refers to the Hebrew word for peace (see Heb. 7:2). Jesus is, therefore, a King of peace as well as of righteousness. Peace was the outcome, “when the people kept justice.” Peace was the expected result of virtue. Jesus inevitably becomes the High Priest of the Most High God and the King of peace.²¹

ii. Melchizedek's Priesthood Not Inherited

One of the most disputed topics surrounding Melchizedek is whether or not his identity was passed down or inherited. Who was he? Meanwhile, the author's argument in Hebrews has been misinterpreted, leading to this question and the many conclusions that people have formed.

“He is without father, mother, or ancestry, and has neither a beginning of days nor an end of existence,” the letter states (Heb. 7:3). As a result, many people have reached various interpretations of who Melchizedek was. Some Jews, according to Burdick, equated Melchizedek with Shem, who was believed to have existed up until the time of Abraham. Though it is only a hunch, it is feasible to identify Melchizedek as Shem.²²

Ronald F. Youngblood states “attempts have been made to identify Melchizedek as an imaginary character named Shem, an angel, the Holy Spirit, Christ, and others. All

²¹ Fudge, 69.

²² Burdick, 313.

are products of speculation, not historical fact... Melchizedek was a real, historical king-priest who served as a type for the greater King-Priest who was to come, Jesus Christ.”²³

The phrase, “without father and mother” is “probably just a convenient way of saying that neither his history nor his genealogy were preserved in the Sacred Writings.” Melchizedek's genealogy was simply unknown or unrecorded. The argument of Hebrews 7 is “similar to the rabbinic argument from silence, which assumed that nothing exists unless Scripture mentions it. Since Genesis says nothing of Melchizedek's parents, genealogy, birth, or death, he serves as a type representing the eternal Son of God.” He continues, “some have assumed that Melchizedek was a Christophany rather than a historical figure and hence viewed Heb. 7:3 literally rather than typologically.” A significant challenge to this, though, is raised by the claim that Melchizedek resembled the *aphōmoiōménos* (Son of God, Heb. 7:3). He explains that “the verb *aphomnoiōō* always assumes two distinct and separate identities, one of which is a copy of the other. Thus, Melchizedek and the Son of God are represented as two separate persons, the first of which resembled the second.” So, Melchizedek was not Jesus revealing himself in human form in the time of Abraham but was a person who lived in his time and was both a priest and king and whose priestly office was by special divine appointment.

In light of this, F. Lindsey explains that “the identification of Melchizedek as a theophany, or appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ in the OT, is sometimes reached based on Heb. 7:3.”²⁴ He is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life. According to Fudge, “This person neither inherited his position by hereditary right nor passed it on to a corporeal descendant; not because he was anything other than a person, but rather because he did not come from a priestly family, he was “without father or mother.”²⁵

The lineage of the Levitical priesthood back to Aaron was the only thing that mattered. A man could not, under any circumstances, become a priest under Jewish law unless he could present a certified pedigree dating back to Aaron.²⁶ On the other hand, except for a few specific physical flaws, nothing on earth could prevent a man from becoming a priest if he could prove his lineage back to Aaron. Genealogy permeated everything. No Israelite, no matter how hard he tried, could ever be a priest because “the one essential was the genealogy; character and talent had nothing

²³ Ronald F. Youngblood, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1995), 819.

²⁴ F. Lindsey, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Vol. 3) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988), 1434.

²⁵ Fudge, 70.

²⁶ Barclay, 69.

to do with it... Personal characteristics were not considered at all.”²⁷ Jesus Furthermore, Christ was the genuine Priest because of who He was rather than what He had inherited. Jesus was the source of His authority and no one else had any. The Aaronic priesthood was dependent on ancestry, whereas the Melchizedek priesthood was solely dependent on personal qualifications.²⁸ Melchizedek's priesthood was based on personality, as opposed to the Levitical priesthood, which was based on law.

Melchizedek is *agenealogētos* (without descent), according to Heb. 7:3. It's possible that the author devised it to highlight the fact that Jesus' power was independent of descent. Most likely, a new word is being used to describe something novel. The letter aimed to demonstrate that Jesus was a priest because of who he was, not because he sprung from a priestly family.

Melchizedek was a representation of Christ as “a priest forever,” not only a precursor, according to Heb. 7:3. Melchizedek's priesthood was not to be transferred to or substituted by another. Melchizedek-style priesthood, which belongs to Jesus alone and cannot be passed down through the generations, is an eternal priesthood. Because of who He is, it is His.²⁹

iii. Permanent Priesthood

Melchizedek's priesthood, unlike the Levitical priesthood, is unchangeable. There was a beginning and an end to the Levitical Priesthood. Heb. 7:12 states that, the priesthood has been “changed,” and goes on to explain in verse 18 that “there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitability thereof.” The author of the letter to the Hebrews quoting Ps. 110:4 in verse 21 says, “the Lord hath sworn, and will not repent, that thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” In other words, David predicted a change in the priesthood by referring to another priest who is not a descendant of Levi. God's promise of a new priesthood proves that the old priesthood was insufficient. Burdick interprets David's statement as “proof that the Levitical priesthood was replaced by a priest like Melchizedek, namely Christ.”³⁰

The priesthood of Christ in contrast to the Levitical priesthood is an “unchangeable priesthood.” Heb. 7:3 says that Jesus “Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.” Verse 24 holds that “his priesthood is permanent

²⁷ Barclay, 74.

²⁸ Barclay, 69.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Burdick, 313.

because he continues forever.” The legal term “unchangeable” means inviolable, unalterable, or non-transferable. As a result, no other priesthood will ever succeed the priesthood of Christ, which is eternal and the last and greatest. It can never be altered.

iv. A More Effective Priest

The author of Hebrews contrasts Jesus Christ, the New Covenant High Priest, with the Old Covenant priest, demonstrating the superiority of the first. He began by emphasizing Jesus' immortality, as opposed to the Levitical priests' mortality. He claims that Jesus was “created, not according to the law of a carnal commandment, but according to the power of an eternal life” (Heb. 7:16). Furthermore, the Levitical priests sinned, whereas Christ is without sin.³¹

The high priest would wash and put on the holy clothes on the Day of Atonement, when he would perform his most significant tasks, and then offer a sacrifice for both his sins and the sins of the people (Heb 5:3). According to Barclay, the first act of the rite that day was a sacrifice for the High Priest's sins. Jesus was spotless, so He never had to make the offering. While the Levitical high priest was a sinful man who provided animal sacrifices for sinful people, Jesus, the sinless Son of God, presented Himself as a sacrifice for the sin of all humanity. Jesus didn't need to offer a sacrifice for Himself since He was without sin.³²

Jesus Christ, the ideal priest, will never be replaced. He is the High Priest who offers the ideal sacrifice on our behalf because He is the sinless and eternal High Priest who does not need to make a sacrifice for Himself. The following are further traits of Jesus that show His superiority:

v. Priesthood By Oath

The Levitical priesthood was based on a rule of descent: He must be a direct descendant of Aaron to serve as a priest. Even so, there are 142 physical faults, some of which are enumerated in Leviticus 8, which could have prevented him from being chosen. But since Jesus was not an ancestor of Aaron, it is still unclear how the priesthood was given to and handed to Him.³³ Christ did not elevate Himself by becoming the High Priest. He was chosen by God to serve as a priest. Because previous priests were made without an oath, but this one was made by someone who told him, “The Lord swore and would not change, you are a priest forever in the order

³¹ Barclay, 85.

³² Barclay, 89.

³³ Ibid.

of Melchizedek” (see Heb. 7:20-21). Jesus was sworn in by God to serve as a priest. The Levitical priesthood never chose its priests based on an oath.

According to Barclay, “the idea of God swearing an oath is startling. Philo was aware of this long ago. He underlined that the main purpose of taking an oath is to provide confidence that a person is telling the truth because a person's word alone might not be taken seriously.”³⁴ Since no one can ever reject God's word, God never needs to do that. If God ever swears to verify a declaration, it must be of the utmost importance. The act of God taking an oath also shows “the unchangeability or immutability of God's counsel or purpose and plan.”³⁵

Before the world was created, Jesus was sworn in and appointed. The Levitical priesthood and the sacrifice system were simply a shadow of things to come because they were copies of the original and pointed to Christ and His priesthood, which was certainly to come.

vi. Better Sacrifice

As stated by Fudge, “Sacrifices were never more important to God than human obedience. In actuality, if man had obeyed, no sacrifices would have been necessary. But since man sinned, a sacrifice was required. The sacrifices made by the Levitical priesthood had a profound significance in that they pointed to the real sacrifice made by Jesus on the cross.”³⁶ The priestly sacrifices were completely ineffective for atoning for sins. What gave those offerings and sacrifices their significance was the fact that they were a representation of Jesus and so a symbol of His offering. The sinner received forgiveness by placing their faith in God's message and acting in obedience by making a sacrifice that, to them, represented Jesus.

According to the letter to the Hebrews, the sacrifices that were regularly made could never make the adherents to the law flawless because the law only served as a preview of better things to come. However, every year a reminder of misdeeds is made in those offerings because the blood of goats and bulls can't atone for sins (Heb. 10:1-4). Because man must make sacrifices every year, the blood of animals could never wash away his sins or clear his guilt; a warning that the real atoning sacrifice, one that would erase sins, had not yet occurred.

Fudge opines that “Christ made just one sacrifice, but He ever lives to make intercession based on that sacrifice.” He served as the sin offering through His death. He is a High Priest in light of His Resurrection and current ministry. Barclay

³⁴ Barclay, 90.

³⁵ Fudge, 66.

³⁶ Fudge, 105.

identifies four ways in which Jesus' offering of himself varies from the animal sacrifices of the ancient covenant:

- a. Jesus offered his life as a willing sacrifice. While the animal was being killed, Jesus voluntarily gave up His life.
- b. Jesus' sacrifice was unplanned. Jesus' sacrifice was the result of love, whereas animal sacrifices were only a result of the law.
- c. Jesus offered a logical sacrifice. The victims, who were animals, were unaware of what was taking place, but Jesus was well aware of what He was doing.
- d. Jesus offered a moral sacrifice. The animal sacrifices, however, were mechanical. Through the everlasting Spirit, Jesus offered his sacrifice in obedience to God's will for the benefit of mankind. Because of this, the sacrifice of Christ is much greater than the priesthood of the Levites. Christ is the ideal offering. And it is through His sacrifice that we receive forgiveness, salvation, and restored communion with God.³⁷

vii. A More Preferred Sanctuary

The Levitical priests served in a sanctuary that represented the real (Heb. 9:24). According to the blueprints God gave Moses, the tabernacle was to be constructed. The author writes, "But Christ being come to a high priest of good things to come, by a larger and more perfect tabernacle, not of this building, not created with hands;" Christ is "a minister of the sanctuary, and of the genuine tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man," in contrast to the Levitical priest, who performed his duties in a temple built and pitched by mankind (Heb. 9:11). Where is the real tabernacle, then? "For Christ has not entered the holy places built with hands, which are symbols of the truth, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the face of God for us" (see Heb. 9:24). Heaven is the genuine sanctuary, of which the old was only a shadow. We have a high priest like that, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the majesty in the heavens. Before God, our High Priest is serving and pleading on our behalf.

Identity of the African Catholic Priests in the Order of Melchizedek

In the Catholic rite of ordination to the presbyterate, the consecration prayer asks that the ordained may acquire "the dignity of the order of presbyters." So it's possible to argue that ordination grants the priest the status of a priest. Like the priesthood itself, it is a role that is practiced and upheld rather than just a designation. In the words of Rausch:

³⁷ Fudge, 89.

Essentially, part of the crisis of the ordained ministry for Roman Catholics is the fact that the one concept which has traditionally characterized the vocation and role of the ordained minister in the Catholic tradition has itself been called into question, namely, the concept of a special, “sacral” priesthood.³⁸

The priest, he says, is sometimes referred to as “another Christ” (*Alter Christus*) and is seen as a holy person who has been endowed with special sacramental power through ordination. This is true because the priesthood of Christ unites the three dimensions that correspond to the three duties that ordained priests play. Priest, king, and prophet are the three *munera*. This is relevant to the understanding of Christ's priesthood in the Letter to the Hebrews because:

- i. Christ communicates God's Word better than the prophets because he is the Word. God spoke to us through the Son, and the Word of God now comes to us through Christ. This is an important aspect of his priesthood.
- ii. Christ sanctifies us as a priest by communicating the divine life to us.
- iii. Christ, as King, governs the Church and ensures its communion in unity.

These three *munera*, which are a part of the priesthood of Christ the High Priest, are conveyed to ordained priests for them to effectively communicate the Word of God as the most important element, the divine life through the sacraments, and the unity of command over God's people. Priestly dignity is, therefore, an approach to the priesthood that stresses all existential dimensions and places an importance on personal holiness and identity.

Upholding the Catholic Priestly Dignity in Africa

Priestly dignity is an intrinsic dignity. For the dignity of course does not mean a style of outward behaviour. A priest upholds his dignity by bringing his priesthood to bear with all his actions. Michael Hollings puts this succinctly thus: “that is why for instance, the priesthood must be with me as my whole way of life, all the time; and its priorities, such as depending upon a close relationship with Jesus Christ.”³⁹

It is a part of priestly dignity to be prophetic in the exercise of the priesthood. Unnecessary fear and inordinate prudence bring down the priestly dignity. The priests must be conscious of the obvious temptation on these given the circumstances of their position in a developing church and a developing nation. Surely there are

³⁸ T. P. Rausch, *Priesthood Today: An Appraisal* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1992), 14.

³⁹ Michael Hollings, *Living Priesthood* (Essex: Mayhew-McGrimmon Ltd. 1977), 98.

personalities they must need by their side to support them materially in their mission and numerous projects but they must realize that these projects are secondary in their work and their churches as church. The core issues remain human persons; bringing them to faith in Jesus Christ, to the knowledge and fear of God and the love of his kingdom. Experience has shown that when people are strictly brought to a high level of faith it is amazing to see how supportive they are to the priests in their projects, even when they (the priests) go against their wishes and across their personalities by insisting on maintaining their priestly dignity.

Part of the priestly dignity is for the priest to feel the love of God in himself when others cannot feel it, or to feel the desolation of misunderstanding, indifference, and lack of concern when he sits empty before God and only feels his absence. When a priest's lifestyle reflects him as being conscious of being the consolation and hope of the masses of the poor, the hungry, the sick, and the underprivileged, for which religion remains the sole hope in life, he is definitely said to be upholding priestly dignity.

Conclusion

One of the ironies of Psalm 110 is that, while its messianic hope for a Melchizedekian priest appears to be an anomaly in Scripture, it serves as one of the most useful and instructive passages for putting the Bible together, as D.A. Carson has suggested.⁴⁰ Only by examining Psalm 110 on its own terms and as part of a unified and gradually revealed redemption plan do we gain a better understanding of the meaning, necessity, and significance of Christ's priesthood for us and our salvation. Melchizedek's name foreshadows Jesus as the "king of righteousness," and his position as king of Salem (Jerusalem) foreshadows Jesus as the king of peace (see Heb. 7:2).

The Genesis account of Melchizedek makes no mention of his parents, genealogy, or the beginning or end of his life. As a result, he foreshadows the coming of Jesus, who is eternal as the divine Son of God (see Heb. 7:3). Melchizedek appears to have been greater than Abraham and his descendant Levi, as Melchizedek collected tithes from Abraham and bestowed a blessing on him (see Heb. 7:4-10). Similarly, Jesus is greater than Abraham and Levi.

Melchizedek was both a king and a priest, which was not true of anyone in David's tribe of Judah according to the Mosaic Law (see Heb. 7:14). However, as prophesied in Psalm 110, Jesus is both King and Priest (see Heb. 7:15-17). Again, this

⁴⁰ D. A. Carson, "Getting Excited About Melchizedek (Psalm 110)," in *The Scriptures Testify About Me: Jesus and The Gospel in The Old Testament* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 146.

demonstrates that Melchizedek was not a member of the priestly order founded by Jesus. He was a priest who foreshadowed Jesus Christ's priesthood, which is shared by the ordained minister in the Catholic Church.

As a result, the importance of Hebrews for any interpretation of the Christian priesthood cannot be overstated. The ancient priesthood was not open to the general public. It was founded on a sanctification system characterized by separation. As a result, it was only available to priests and the High Priest. No one could follow or accompany the High Priest when he entered the Holy of Holies. "There shall be no man in the tent of meeting" (Lev. 16:17), that is, no one in the first part is called the "holy place," according to the Book of Leviticus. Instead, because it was founded on an act of complete fraternal solidarity with Christ, the priesthood of Christ is fully open to participation.

The Africa Catholic Christians will be more edified and more proud of their faith when priestly dignity is fully acknowledged and upheld. It is the unique dignity of Christ that the priest possesses by virtue of ordination. It is this dignity that makes people see in him not the man but something bigger, the power of Christ, a power that mystifies yet recognizable. In the African religious context, priestly dignity is rather challenging both for the priests themselves and the faithful people.