

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL



MELCHIZEDEK

A “biography” of the mysterious Melchizedek must, by definition, be an odd thing. We know next to nothing about him; we do not know where he came from, and we know nothing of his end; and aside from his one moment in it during the life of Abram, he is utterly detached from the Bible’s historical narrative. He is an enigma, yet he was and remains a pivotal figure, for Christ Jesus in His priesthood was likened to him.

This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Hebrews 6:19-20

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*the writings of
david s lampel*

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KING OF PEACE

To study Melchizedek is to study the Son of God, and His earthly incarnation, Jesus the Christ. Why and how we know anything of Melchizedek is that he stands as an ancient type of the Son. Indeed, we can understand better the cosmic role of Christ, the Son of God, in eternity past, present, and future, by getting to know this king-priest of Salem.

IN THE CHRONOLOGY of the written word of God, we are introduced to Melchizedek in just eight verses in the book of Genesis, when Abram is returning home from defeating the four kings that had fought against Sodom and took captive his nephew, Lot.

Then after his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the valley of Shaveh (that is, the King’s Valley). And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High.

Genesis 14:17-18

That last sentence contains a wealth of information about Melchizedek. He was a king; not all scholars agree, but the consensus is that “Salem” is just an ancient name for what would become Jerusalem. That he was also a priest—the first priest mentioned in the Bible—was not uncommon at the time. In ancient city/states, the king would often be a priest as well. The fact that the mysterious Melchizedek was both, however, will play an important role later on in God’s word. While it was not extraordinary at the time that a king would also be a

priest, what was extraordinary was the God whom this priest served: the “God Most High.” Here the mystery about Melchizedek deepens.

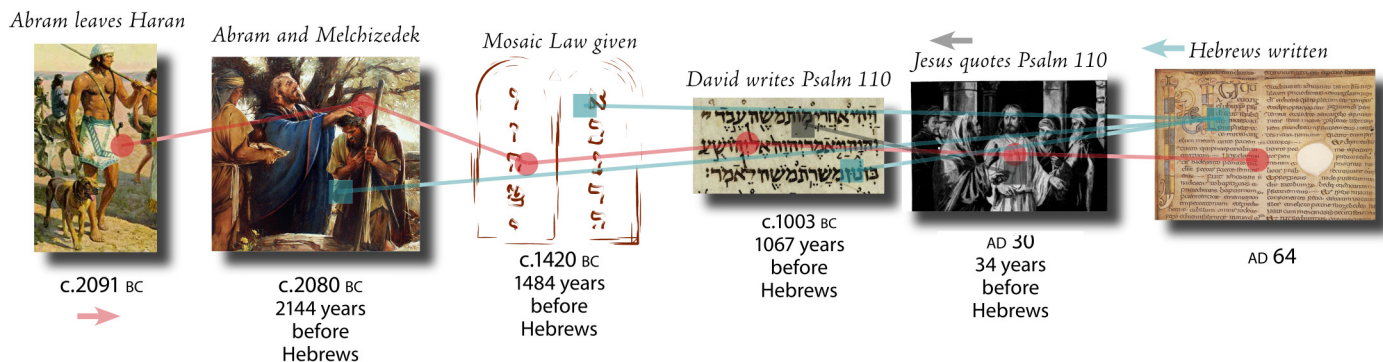
J. R. R. Tolkien once said that the first step to writing a story is to draw a map. And invariably the first step in understanding a portion of God’s word is to get one’s historical bearings. To grasp the import of Melchizedek being a priest of “God Most High” we must place him in biblical history—the sequence in which critical events in God’s word occurred.

The earliest of the events is the meeting between Melchizedek and Abram. Abram was called out of Haran c.2091 BC. The meeting with Melchizedek took place after Lot and Abram go their separate ways, c.2080 BC.—approximately 2,144 years before the writing of the letter to the Hebrews.

Somewhere between 1446 and 1406 BC—thus we will settle on a midpoint of 1420 BC—the Mosaic Law was given by God to Moses. This was approximately 1,484 years before the writing of Hebrews.

Around the year 1003 BC, King David is made king over all Israel, brings the ark—and the priesthood—to Jerusalem, and writes Psalm 110, which mentions Melchizedek—approxi-

FROM ABRAM & MELCHIZEDEK TO CHRIST



mately 1,067 years before the writing of Hebrews.

Next, sometime during the final days of Jesus' ministry on earth (AD 30), he validates David's authorship of Psalm 110, and quotes from it (Matthew 22:41-46). This would be approximately 34 years before the writing of Hebrews.

Finally the letter to the Hebrews, written around AD 64, brings all these events together and draws powerful theological lessons from them.

So the historical Melchizedek, standing with Abram the father of Israel, was a priest of the God of Israel before there *was* an Israel, before the Law was handed down to Moses, before David wrote Psalm 110, before the Son of God was incarnated. This means that no one but God Himself could have anointed Melchizedek as priest. And because he did not know the name *Yahweh*, he refers to Him as "God Most High, possessor [or creator] of heaven and earth."

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all the spoils, was first of all, by the translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace.

Hebrews 7:1-2

As the writer to the Hebrews points out for us, the name Melchizedek means "king of righteousness," or, more literally, "king of right." But his title of "king of Salem" means that he is also "king of peace," for the name Salem shares the root for the Hebrew *shalom*, meaning "peace."

Thus this mysterious man was both a king and a priest of God Most High, anointed by God Himself. As a priest, he offered bread and wine to Abram and blessed him; acknowledging his priesthood, Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth—a tithe—of his spoils from the war.

The Pentateuch, written probably by Moses, is filled with references to *Yahweh*, the Jewish national name—the proper name—of the God of Israel, translated in most Bibles as "LORD" (in small caps). Moses wrote these five books, however, long after the time of Melchizedek. Since Moses was an Israelite (of the tribe of Levi), he would, of course, have used the name *Yahweh* (or *Jehovah*; literally, in Hebrew, *yhvh*) in his writings. But Melchizedek was not an Israelite, and he knew the God who called him to be a priest not by His personal Jewish name, but by His *universal* name: "God Most High [El Elyon], possessor of heaven and earth." That is, Melchizedek knew Him as the highest God above all gods, the one who created the universe.

KING AND PRIEST

There is nothing remarkable about the royal priest Melchizedek in the brief Genesis narrative. He meets Abram as he returns from war, refreshes him with food and drink and pronounces a blessing on him, then accepts a tithe from the grateful Abram. That's it. After this, the man Melchizedek disappears from history—except that in his breathtakingly messianic Psalm 110, King David reinvigorates the character and story of Melchizedek by associating him with the foretold Messiah.

PERHAPS IN NO OTHER PSALM is the superscription as important as the one in Psalm 110. The superscriptions of the psalms, when included, are as inspired as the text that follows. In fact, while in most of our Bibles they are set apart in a different font, implying they have been added in later by the editors, in the earliest manuscripts they were flowed right into the text.

This psalm begins (as do many others) “A Psalm of David,” but in this psalm that appellation is of critical importance. For right at the beginning of verse one it is important that we know who is speaking. It begins with, “The LORD [yhwah] says to my Lord [adonai].” What is different here (and why the superscription is so important) is the obvious question: Who is speaking? Here we have one Lord speaking to another Lord. If King David is doing the speaking, who is this second Lord? Certainly the king would not have an *earthly* lord over him. Yahweh, certainly, but no one else. In Matthew 22 Jesus Himself identifies this second Lord.

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question: “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?” They said to Him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “Then how does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord,’ saying, ‘The LORD said to my Lord, “sit at My right hand, until I put Your enemies beneath Your feet”?’ If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his son?” No one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question.

Matthew 22:41-46

Just for a moment, think about David. It is not hard to imagine that King David had his daily devotions, in which he read Scripture, just as

do many of us. In fact, the kings of Israel were commanded to do this.

“Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left, so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel.”

Deuteronomy 17:18-20

The king was to write it out in his own hand, and read it every day as a reminder of how he was to live. And, being a “man after God’s own heart,” David surely did this. So just imagine: one day he is reading Genesis 14, about Abram



and Melchizedek, the Spirit takes hold of him and suddenly he is struck by something. He reads what we have as verse eighteen, that this mysterious Melchizedek was king of Salem: “And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine.” So good so far. But then David reads on in the scroll: “Now he was a priest of God Most High.”

And this is where the Spirit slaps him upside the head. *Wait a minute!* David says to himself. *The last time I read through the law I read that this could not be.* What he remembered, first, was that earlier the oracle through the prophet Nathan declared of the Davidic dynasty that,

“...the Lord will make a house for you. When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever.”

2 Samuel 7:11b-16

And King David remembers well *why* God’s lovingkindness departed Saul, that Saul tried to be king and priest. And God’s law forbade that. The Mosaic law—which came between Abram and David—declared that the king would come from the tribe of Judah, but the priesthood

could only come from the tribe of Levi. Never could one man be both. But here in his devotions David is reading about Melchizedek—who was both!

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High.

Genesis 14:18

So in verse one of his psalm, King David writes of Yahweh speaking to his (David’s) Lord—who will be, at once, of David’s seed and his Lord. Then in verse four David writes again about a conversation between Yahweh and the Messiah, in which the Lord God declares that the Messiah, Christ Jesus, will be not just a king, but also “a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”

How is Jesus the Christ a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek? Because, for one thing, the old king of Salem (Jerusalem), whom Abram revered with a tithe, was both king and priest.

What we have in the first verse of Psalm 110 is King David prophesying, *Jehovah God says to His Son, who is my Lord (who would not be on earth for almost another 1,000 years), “You, my Son, take Your place on My right until I subdue all Your enemies on the final Judgment Day.”* The Son will be a king because the second verse declares that He will rule with a strong scepter—the scepter of a king.

Then in the fourth verse of Psalm 110, Yahweh (the LORD) declares that this same king will be a “priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”

King *and* priest—forever.

A PRIEST FOREVER

The writer to the Hebrews performs an innocent but fascinating sleight of hand in verse three of his chapter on Melchizedek.

Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually.

Hebrews 7:3

MELCHIZEDEK DID NOT JUST MAGICALLY appear. He is certainly mysterious, but not supernatural. Melchizedek is not *literally* without lineage; he is “literarily” without lineage; it is just not mentioned in the narrative—the literature. But that silence on his lineage is both deafening and important.

Why is he here? Why does this mysterious king/priest so oddly disrupt what should be a pretty straightforward narrative of post-battle accounting? But then, why is *anything* in the Bible? To bring glory to God and His Son, Jesus Christ. Melchizedek is inserted into the narrative of Genesis as a type of Christ—to illuminate certain important aspects of who and what He is.

Words are important in the Bible. We begin reading verse three and our inclination is to have in mind the earthly Jesus—who certainly did not have a human father; his “dad,” so to speak, was the Holy Spirit. But then it says without mother, and we think, quite rightly, that Jesus did indeed have a human mother. And Jesus certainly did have a beginning of

days and end of life, at least in a temporal sense.

But the writer of this letter-sermon to the Hebrews is not talking about Jesus of Nazareth, but “the Son of God,” which is something quite different. Verse three applies accurately to the second member of the triune Godhead, who was not born of a father and mother, did not have any forebears, had no beginning and will most definitely not have an “end of life.”

Likewise, the writer concludes his description of Melchizedek with, “made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually”—less “continually,” as some translations have it, as if repetitiously nonstop, but in perpetuity, forever. He says this about Melchizedek because the Genesis narrative does not record an end to his priesthood. It just leaves it out. But it uses Melchizedek as the earthly type of the never-dying Son and His never-ending priesthood.

In verse three the writer to the Hebrews speaks “literarily” of Melchizedek; he speaks *literally* of the Son of God.

Some scholars conclude that the mysterious Melchizedek was indeed supernatural—a visitation, for example, by the pre-incarnate Christ. But the Genesis account bears none of the standard marks for that. The “angel of the Lord” that stayed Abraham’s hand on Mt. Moriah *was* such a visitation. One way we know this is by examining the pronouns used by the angel, as He identifies Himself with God, and the lack of certain quotation marks in the translations. We have none of that in the Melchizedek event of Genesis. In addition, we have Hebrews 7:3, which states that he was made “like” the Son of God. The word translated “like” means “similar to,” or “resemble.”

HE SAT DOWN

For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever.

Hebrews 7:26-28

ONE OF THE TRULY REMARKABLE ASPECTS of the meeting between Abram and Melchizedek is that it prefigures not the coming priesthood through the Mosaic Law, but it prefigures the *better* priesthood of Christ which will replace it. Imagine, when God handed down the Law through Moses, He went into excruciating detail about the creation and conduct of this brand new priesthood. But roughly 660 years before that Mosaic priesthood is inaugurated, the Lord revealed to the ultimate patriarch, Abram, a type for the superior priesthood that would supersede it in Christ!

King David, writing in the Spirit, acknowledged this in his writing of Psalm 110—1,077 years later—during a time when the Mosaic Law was in full effect, and roughly 1,000 years before Jesus was even born.

In Melchizedek God skips right over the economy of the priesthood, temple sacrifices, keeping of the detailed Mosaic requirements—and prefigures the better way that man will have in Christ Jesus!



Every Christian believer knows about the sacrifice Christ Jesus made on the cross of Golgotha. And, as the apostle John declares, this makes Jesus the “propitiation for our sins.”

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

1 John 2:1-2

As the propitiation, Christ Jesus is the blood of the bull and the goat carried into the most holy place by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. On the cross the innocent, sinless Christ shed His blood for the sins of the guilty—just as the innocent, sinless bull and innocent, sinless goat shed their blood for the sins of the guilty.

But there is one important, earth-shaking difference between the blood of the animals and the blood of Jesus. The blood of the animals, sprinkled onto the mercy seat, satisfied the wrath of a holy God only for a moment—only until the next sin was committed. But the blood of Christ satisfied the wrath of a holy God *for all time*.

Jesus is not just the blood sprinkled onto the mercy seat; Jesus is the high priest carrying it beyond the veil into the holy of holies.

This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

Hebrews 6:19-20

Like Melchizedek, Jesus is both king and priest. But as high priest, *He carries His own blood into the holy of holies.*

As if that were not sufficiently astonishing, Jesus plays yet a third role in the drama of atonement.

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ

for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace *through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.* This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Romans 3:21-26 (emphasis added)

This word translated “propitiation” in Romans 3:25 is not the same as the word in 1 John 2:2. In John’s letter the Greek word means the bleeding victim on the altar—the literal atoning sacrifice—whereas in the Romans passage the word means *propitiatory*—the mercy seat atop the ark, God’s throne on earth. Thus Paul is saying that Christ Jesus *is* the mercy seat.

In the design of the tabernacle/temple and in the economy of the Mosaic Law, there was no chair for the priest in the holy of holies. The high priest could not sit down because his work was never finished. Month after month, day after tedious day the bloody sacrifices went on, and on, and on. And year after year the high priest on the Day of Atonement had to go through the same identical ritual. He could never sit down in the presence of holy God because there would always be more sins requiring atonement. His work was never finished.

There was, indeed, a chair in the holy of holies—it just wasn’t for him.



When introducing Jesus to his disciples, John the Baptist declared Him to be “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Most Christians read that and see in their mind an image of the cross bearing the slaughtered Lamb who died to atone for their sins. Certainly true—and praise be to His name for that. Christ Jesus is worthy of our adoration, our devotion for that selfless act.

When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left... It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness

fell over the whole land until the ninth hour, because the sun was obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two. And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Having said this, He breathed His last.

Luke 23:33, 44-46

That, however, is only part of the wonder of this supernatural drama, and we do ourselves and our Lord a disservice when we stop with that. As vital and central as the cross is to our salvation, the subsequent scenes in this drama speak not just to salvation, but to *our whole life in Christ.* The entire story—the story so many miss because, through fear or disinterest, they don’t bother digging deeper—reveals a loving, merciful Savior willing to give everything of Himself for those who belong to Him.

Christ Jesus is the Lamb who was slain. It is *His* blood being carried into the holy of holies. As our great High Priest Christ intercedes on our behalf to the Father, carrying into the most holy place the blood that will atone for our sin. Once inside, He is the one who sprinkles the blood on the mercy seat—but He *is* the mercy seat.

To our temporal sensibilities this seems strange, if not downright bizarre. How can Jesus represent all three? How can Jesus *be* all three?

That is the point precisely.

We have so limited our knowledge and understanding of God and His Son that we too readily greet such information with a smug, “Aw, c’mon.” By being satisfied with Jesus as our Savior, and expressing little desire to comprehend Him further, in our mind we have restricted Him to Calvary and the tomb. But in reality, Christ Jesus Son of God is Lord and Judge of the entire universe! He *is everything*, and in Him everything holds together!

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn

from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

Colossians 1:15-20

The mercy seat is God's throne on earth. As such it serves a multitude of purposes. First, the mercy seat "covers" the Law in the ark below. Physically this means that under the Mosaic economy the Presence of God resting upon the mercy seat did not judge by the tablets contained inside, but judged according to the blood sacrifice. But that blood covered only those sins committed up to that point; after that, new blood was required.

The blood of Jesus truly and permanently "covers" the Law. Since Jesus is the mercy seat, and it is His blood eternally sprinkled upon it, the Law cannot touch those who are in Him. The writer to the Hebrews so eloquently describes this for us in the opening of his letter.

And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they.

Hebrews 1:3-4

He sat down.

Year after year the high priest of the Jews had to sprinkle fresh blood upon the mercy seat. Always there were new sins, so always there must be new blood. For this reason he never sat down in the holy of holies; his work was never finished. But Christ Jesus, as the Great High Priest sprinkled His own blood—and sat down, *becoming* the mercy seat.

Done.

Accomplished.

Finished.

Second, the mercy seat is where Yahweh met sinners in the person of the high priest. Now, with Christ as our Great High Priest and as the mercy seat itself, it is to our sublime Intercessor

and Advocate we go. There He reveals the Father, and the Father sees us in His Son. It has never been called the "wrath seat," where the Lord God would dispense His fierce judgment over rebellion and sin, but it is called the mercy seat. And that name was never more apt than now when, in Christ, believers come to confess and mourn over sin, and receive His grace.

Christ is the one appointed Meeting-place between God and His people, the place where He meets with them not in judgment but in grace.

Arthur W. Pink

Third, the mercy seat is where believers can enjoy communion with their God and Savior.

"There I will meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel."

Exodus 25:22

Jesus invites us to meet with Him. We need bring with us no priest, no sacrificial blood—all that has already been supplied. We need not be afraid; it is called the *mercy seat*. Here is sweet communion with our Lord; our very presence in His presence is proof of His love for us.

We need not behave like Miriam, miserable in our darkness yet unwilling to step into the light. Here is opportunity, gracious opportunity extended to learn of Jesus, to listen to His voice, to receive His counsel, to know Him on a level more profound than we can possibly imagine.



Ah, but you say there is no tent, no tabernacle or temple. There is no longer a holy of holies behind the veil, no ark, no cherubim, no mercy seat—all that is gone. You are correct, and herein is the astounding wonder of it all. Believers are *in* Christ and He is *in* them, so where He is, we are. Just as every disciple of Christ carries around with him or her the risen Christ, so we carry around with us the holy of holies and the mercy seat.

The veil is gone forever! It perished at His sacrificial, atoning death!

And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth shook and the rocks were split.

Matthew 27:50-51

The mercy seat used to be hidden behind a veil; now it is hidden in every believer's heart.

It is in the Lord Jesus that Christians have been brought into this place of inestimable blessing. Not only have we been brought nigh to God, but we are permitted to speak to Him and hear Him speaking to us. Having been reconciled to God by the death of His Son, He now says, "I will commune with thee." Wondrous grace is this! Oh that our hearts may enter into and enjoy this blessed privilege. Then, "Let us come boldly unto the throne of grace." There is nothing between: no sin, no guilt, and the veil has been rent. We may worship in the holy of holies! Then "Let us draw near in full assurance of faith."

Pink

The man Melchizedek is not important in and of himself. He is not worthy of our attention because of anything he did, who his parents were, any grandiloquent statements issued from his lips, or because societies were founded around his laws. We know nothing of his personality, his children, or the manner of his lifestyle.

Instead, Melchizedek is important because of who and what he represents, who he prefigures: he was "made like the Son of God." The brief historical snapshot of Melchizedek in Genesis and the explanatory comparison to Christ made by the writer to the Hebrews leave us with a profound picture of God's mercy toward mankind expressed through the perpetual, eternal priesthood of the Son of God—even Jesus, the Messiah.

Remember: the prophet speaks to man for God, while a priest speaks to God for man. In Christ's eternal priesthood every one who has placed his or her trust in Him has a never-exhausted, never-replaced, never-inadequate advocate speaking to God the Father on their behalf.



But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Hebrews 9:11-14