

Who In The Heck Was Melchizedek?

Who was this Melchizedek? We know very little of him through what is recorded in Holy Scripture, but the Jewish targums [Aramaic translations and paraphrases of the Old Testament which came into use after the exile (586 B.C.)] and other writings make it very clear that Jewish tradition identifies him as Noah's firstborn son, Shem. Melchizedek is his throne name (just as Benedict XVI is the throne name of Joseph Ratzinger).

"When Abraham returned from the war, Shem, or, as he is sometimes called, Melchizedek, the king of righteousness, priest of God Most High, and king of Jerusalem, came forth to meet him with bread and wine" [see Genesis 14:17-18] (Ginzberg, Louis, *Legends of the Bible*, Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1956, page 106).

How can this be? Noah lived many years before Abraham. After all, it was Noah and his descendants who repopulated the world after the flood and there are lots of people around when Abraham is living. Let's look at Genesis 11:10-26 for a few minutes, this passage traces the genealogy of Abraham (or Abram as he was known before God changed his name) from Shem.

¹⁰ This is the record of the descendants of Shem. When Shem was one hundred years old, he became the father of Arpachshad, two years after the flood. ¹¹ Shem lived five hundred years after the birth of Arpachshad, and he had other sons and daughters. ¹² When Arpachshad was thirty-five years old, he became the father of Shelah. ¹³ Arpachshad lived four hundred and three years after the birth of Shelah, and he had other sons and daughters. ¹⁴ When Shelah was thirty years old, he became the father of Eber. ¹⁵ Shelah lived four hundred and three years after the birth of Eber, and he had other sons and daughters. ¹⁶ When Eber was thirty-four years old, he became the father of Peleg. ¹⁷ Eber lived four hundred and thirty years after the birth of Peleg, and he had other sons and daughters. ¹⁸ When Peleg was thirty years old, he became the father of Reu. ¹⁹ Peleg lived two hundred and nine years after the birth of Reu, and he had other sons and daughters. ²⁰ When Reu was thirty-two years old, he became the father of Serug. ²¹ Reu lived two hundred and seven years after the birth of Serug, and he had other sons and daughters. ²² When Serug was thirty years old, he became the father of Nahor. ²³ Serug lived two hundred years after the birth of Nahor, and he had other sons and daughters. ²⁴ When Nahor was twenty-nine years old, he became the father of Terah. ²⁵ Nahor lived one hundred and nineteen years after the birth of Terah, and he had other sons and daughters. ²⁶ When Terah was seventy years old, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran.

Using the numbers from this passage, we can calculate Shem's age at the beginning of each generation (100 + 35 + 30 + 34 + 30 + 32 + 30 + 29 + 70 = 390 when Abram was born). We find that Shem lived for six hundred years and, in fact, outlived Abraham by 35 years, who himself lived to be 175, (390 + 175 = 565, Shem's age when Abraham died, and 600 - 565 =

35). Did people really live that long back then? We don't know, but the sacred author certainly wants us to be able to see the connection between Shem/Melchizedek and Abraham; otherwise this genealogy which gives all these ages would not have been included.

Why is this connection important? Because it traces the priesthood of the family. As we follow the blessing through Scripture we find that in Genesis 9:1,9 Noah is blessed by God and in Genesis 9:26 Shem is blessed by Noah. The next mention of the blessing is in Genesis 14:19 where Abram is blessed by Melchizedek. Later, the son of Abraham, Isaac, is blessed and then Isaac passes the blessing on to Jacob instead of Esau, as he had intended. When he finds that he has been deceived, Isaac tells Esau that the blessing cannot be taken back and describes the effect of this priestly ordination: **I have already appointed him your master, and I have assigned to him all his kinsmen as his slaves** (Genesis 27:37). This is the priesthood of the order of Melchizedek, the priesthood of the family.

But what about where Melchizedek is described in the Letter to the Hebrews: **He is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest for ever** (Hebrews 7:3)? Doesn't this show that he was not a mortal being but instead is a spiritual being of some sort? Not at all; when reading a first century text addressed to a specific audience, in this case the Hebrews, we must read the text through the eyes of the intended recipient (namely, a first century Hebrew: someone who would be familiar with the uniquely Jewish ceremonies and requirements).

The Letter to the Hebrews compares Jesus and His priesthood to the Levitical priesthood and to the background which established that priesthood, the sin of the golden calf. Unlike Levitical priests, who had to prove their Levitical genealogy (Ezra 2:62-63; Nehemiah 7:64-65) for 10 generations on their father's side and 5 generations on their mother's side, with no unclean marriages (to non-Jews) and no illegitimacy, Shem/Melchizedek had no requirement for such proof. Also, unlike Levitical priests, who began their apprenticeship at age 25, were ordained at age 30, and were required to retire at age 50 (a beginning and end of days), Shem/Melchizedek kept the blessing for over 400 years before passing it on to Abraham. Once the blessing was conferred, the father continued in his position as elder of the family, but the one who received the blessing assumed the responsibility for the well-being of the family.

This family priesthood blessing is the same blessing which was bestowed on Jesus. The genealogy of Jesus goes from Adam to Seth, to Noah, to Shem, to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, to Judah, to Perez and so on to Jesse, David, Solomon, and eventually to Jesus the High Priest of the family of God and Eternal King. It is called the "order of Melchizedek" because it is different from the Levitical priesthood. Shem/Melchizedek is the first priest mentioned in the Scriptures and he was also king of righteousness and King of Salem (later known as Jerusalem); a "type" of Christ.

Is all this understanding necessary for our salvation? Certainly not, but it does help us to put the Scriptural references in proper context and avoid mythologizing and misrepresenting the characters.