

# WRESTLING WITH THE BIBLICAL TEXT

“Jesus, God’s Different Priest” (Hebrews 7:11)

By Herbert W. Bateman IV

Before I share some of the results of my study on Hebrews 7:11, let me say something first about Hebrews chapter seven.

Hebrews 7 highlights the author’s central teaching about a man named Melchizedek and how it is that Jesus resembles Melchizedek, particularly his royal priesthood. The author first retells and interprets a story about Melchizedek found in Genesis 14:18–20 (verses 1–10). He then turns his interpretation into an application about God changing the Levitical priesthood and terminating the Mosaic Law (verses 11–19). He concludes the chapter by way of three contrasts between the priests from the tribe of Levi and Jesus whose priesthood is like Melchizedek’s (verses 20–28).

Hebrews 7:11 opens the author’s application about Melchizedek. Verse 11 reads, “So if perfection had in fact been possible through the Levitical priesthood—for on that basis the people received the law—what further need would there have been for a different priest to arise, said to be in the order of Melchizedek and not in Aaron’s order?”

Now when I first read Hebrews 7:11, I said to myself, “What?” Yet it helped when I finally realized that the author wrote a sentence that presented a contrary-to-fact or an unreal condition. Here’s what I mean. Let me rewrite the verse this way: “If perfection had in fact been possible through the Levitical priesthood” (but it is not), “would there have been a need for another priest to arise” (but there was). So the author tells us two things: (1) the Levitical priesthood did not bring perfection and (2) there was a need for a different kind of priest.

Now a Levitical priest was a priest whose ancestry could be traced back to Levi, a son of Jacob (see Genesis 24:34; Exodus 28:41). Even though they did not have “ancestry.com,” they knew their ancestry. Moses and his brother Aaron were also Levites. Yet not everyone who was born a Levite entered the priesthood. Unlike his father Zachariah who served as a priest, John the Baptist was not a priest (see Luke 1:5, 8–9; 2:59–80). So a Levitical priest was someone who could trace their ancestry back to Levi and who were eligible to enter the priesthood (like Zachariah) and perform priestly duties.

We also need to define the word “perfection” (τελείωσις). “Perfection” does not mean faultless or to be “without flaws.” “Perfection” in Hebrews concerns a person’s relationship with God. So the author tells us that Levitical priests, no matter what they did, no matter how many sacrifices they offered, no matter how many prayers they prayed, Levitical priests were unable to fix or establish a person’s relationship with God. So the author tells us there was need. There was a need for a “different” priest.

The word “different” (ἕτερον) is rather significant here because the author chose “different” over the word that meant “another” (ἄλλος). The word “another” meant another of the “same kind” of Levitical priest. Yet for the author of Hebrews, there was a need for a “different kind” of priest. The different kind of priest that was needed was a royal priest similar to that of Melchizedek and not a man from Aaron’s lineage. So a notable change in priesthoods was necessary to fix a person’s relationship with God.

So whom does God raise up to fix this problem? Jesus! Jesus was not a descendant from Levi. He was a descendant of Judah (Levi’s brother; see Genesis 29:35; 49:10). Jesus’ ancestry could also be traced back to King David (see Matthew 1:6–16). Hebrews tells us that Jesus was that different kind of priest to “arise” and fix the relational problem that exists between God and people. And just like Melchizedek who was a royal priest, Jesus is God’s appointed royal priest who has made it possible for me to have a relationship with God for which I am truly grateful.

Excerpt from the Hebrews commentary in the Kerux Commentary Series (Kregel, forthcoming)

© February 10, 2016 Cyber-Center for Biblical Studies

For any copying and distribution of this material please contact [hwbatemaniv@gmail.com](mailto:hwbatemaniv@gmail.com)