

Session 17 Abraham, Levi, And The Greater Priesthood

Before the Silence: A Study of Hebrews

Session 17 | Hebrews 7:4-10

The Argument From Abraham To Levi (Hebrews 7:4-10)

Session 16 introduced Melchisedec as the king-priest whom Abraham met after the battle of Genesis 14. He blessed Abraham, received a tenth from him, and appears in the biblical record without the genealogy or succession required by the later Aaronic order. Hebrews now tells the hearers to **consider** what those facts mean.

This passage can feel remote to a Christian audience because its argument uses patriarchal ancestry, Israel's tithing law, and priestly rank. Its purpose, however, is precise: **to demonstrate that the priesthood represented by Melchisedec is superior to the Levitical priesthood.** The writer is not giving the church a tithing command. He is establishing the greatness of the order to which Jesus' priesthood belongs.

The Logic At A Glance

1. **Abraham gave a tenth to Melchisedec (v. 4).** The honored patriarch stands as giver; Melchisedec stands as receiving priest.
2. **Levitical priests receive tithes only by the Law (v. 5).** They receive from fellow descendants of Abraham.
3. **Melchisedec received from Abraham himself and blessed him (v. 6).** Abraham is no ordinary man; he is the holder of God's promises.
4. **In this priestly transaction, the lesser is blessed by the greater (v. 7).** Therefore, Melchisedec occupies the superior position relative to Abraham.
5. **Levitical priests die; the Melchisedec testimony is that "he liveth" (v. 8).** Mortality limits Levi's order.
6. **Levi was still in Abraham's loins when Abraham paid (vv. 9-10).** "So to speak," the later tithe-receiver paid tithes through his ancestor.
7. **Therefore:** Levi's priesthood is subordinate to the priesthood represented by Melchisedec. The conclusion concerns **priestly orders**, not the personal worth of Abraham or his descendants.

Hebrews 7:4 - Abraham Gives To The Greater Priest

Now consider how great this man was, unto whom even the patriarch Abraham gave the tenth of the spoils.

Exegesis

- **"Now consider"** is a command to observe the transaction carefully. The conclusion will come from the direction of the tithe: Abraham gives; Melchisedec receives.
- **"How great this man was"** announces the point before presenting the evidence. The writer is establishing Melchisedec's greatness in order to compare priesthoods.
- **"Even the patriarch Abraham"** gives the argument its force. Abraham is Israel's honored ancestor and the man to whom God gave the promises. Yet Abraham acknowledges Melchisedec as God's priest.
- The tenth comes from the goods recovered after Abraham defeated the kings. This was a particular historical act connected with the victory, not a recurring payment described throughout Abraham's life.
- Giving a tenth does not by itself prove every possible kind of superiority. Here it is significant because Scripture identifies the recipient as **"the priest of the most high God" (Genesis 14:18).**

Closely Relevant Cross-References

- **Genesis 14:16-20** - Abraham recovers the people and goods; Melchizedek blesses him; Abraham gives the tenth.
- **Genesis 14:22-24** - Abraham refuses enrichment from Sodom's king, distinguishing the tenth given to God's priest from personal profit.
- **Genesis 12:1-3** - Abraham already possesses extraordinary promises when he acknowledges Melchizedek.
- **Hebrews 7:6-7** - The blessing supplies a second and explicit demonstration of relative greatness.

Text And Translation Notes

- **"Consider"** translates a word meaning to observe or contemplate. The hearers are being asked to follow an argument, not merely notice an interesting detail.
- **"Spoils"** refers to the recovered battle goods. The term can carry the idea of the choice or top portion of a heap.

What The Passage Does Not Say

- It does not command Christians to imitate Abraham by paying ten percent.
- It does not say Abraham purchased Melchisedec's blessing. In Genesis, the blessing is spoken before the tenth is mentioned.

Hebrews 7:5 - Levi Receives By The Law

And verily they that are of the sons of Levi, who receive the office of the priesthood, have a commandment to take tithes of the people according to the law, that is, of their brethren, though they come out of the loins of Abraham:

Exegesis

- The writer now places the familiar Levitical system beside the earlier Genesis event. The Levitical priests truly possess authority, but their authority to receive tithes comes **“according to the law.”**
- The verse distinguishes those sons of Levi who receive the priestly office. It does not treat every Levite as an Aaronic altar priest.
- The priests receive from **“their brethren.”** Both priest and giver belong to the people descended from Abraham. Their common ancestry does not erase the legal distinction of office, but neither does the office make the priests greater than Abraham.
- The Law therefore establishes a collection within Abraham’s family. Melchisedec’s case is different: he stands outside Levi’s genealogy and receives a tenth from Abraham himself.
- This comparison honors the Law’s real authority while showing that the Levitical arrangement is not the highest priestly

order recognized in Scripture.

Closely Relevant Cross-References

- **Numbers 18:21-24** - Israel’s tithe supports the Levites in their appointed service.
- **Numbers 18:25-28** - The Levites themselves give a tenth from what they receive.
- **Exodus 28:1** - Aaron and his sons are appointed to the priest’s office.
- **Deuteronomy 18:1-5** - Priestly provision belongs to Israel’s legal and inheritance arrangement.

Text And Translation Notes

- **“Verily”** means indeed and concedes the genuine legal authority of the Levitical priesthood.
- **“Loins”** is an ancestry expression. It prepares for the representative reasoning in verses 9-10.

What The Passage Does Not Say

- It does not equate Israel’s priests and Levites with pastors or church officers.
- It does not criticize the Law as illegitimate. The limitation of an office does not cancel the divine authority by which it was established.

Hebrews 7:6-7 - The Promise-Holder Blessed By The Greater

*But he whose descent is not counted from them received tithes of Abraham, and blessed him that had the promises.
And without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better.*

Exegesis

- **“But he”** returns to Melchisedec. His priestly position does not come from the Levitical line, which did not yet exist as a priestly institution.
- The writer joins two facts: **Melchisedec received Abraham’s tenth** and **Melchisedec blessed Abraham**. Together they establish the direction of priestly recognition.
- Abraham is deliberately called **“him that had the promises.”** His covenant importance strengthens rather than weakens the argument. If the promise-holder receives a priestly blessing, the one blessing him must occupy a remarkable position.
- Verse 7 states the controlling principle: in this priestly blessing, **“the less”** is Abraham and **“the better”** is Melchisedec.
- “Less” and “better” describe their relative positions in this transaction. Abraham is not morally inferior, rejected, or stripped of the promises.
- Melchisedec is therefore shown to be greater than Abraham in **priestly rank**. Since Levi descends from Abraham, this prepares the conclusion that Melchisedec’s order is greater than Levi’s.

Closely Relevant Cross-References

- **Genesis 14:19-20** - Melchizedek blesses Abraham and credits God for the victory.
- **Genesis 12:2-3** - God had already promised to bless Abraham and make him a blessing.
- **Numbers 6:22-27** - Israel’s priests pronounce the LORD’s appointed blessing, illustrating the official character of priestly blessing.
- **Hebrews 6:13-18** - The preceding chapter emphasizes the certainty of the promises given to Abraham.

Text And Translation Notes

- **“Whose descent is not counted from them”** means Melchisedec does not derive his standing from the Levitical group. The phrase should be kept tied to the immediate comparison.
- **“Without all contradiction”** means beyond dispute. It introduces the accepted principle by which the blessing is interpreted.
- Older English **“of the better”** means **by the better** or greater person.

What The Passage Does Not Say

- It does not teach that every person who says “God bless you” is superior to the hearer. The principle concerns this recognized priestly blessing.
- It does not diminish Abraham’s promises. It identifies a priesthood great enough to bless the man who possessed them.

Hebrews 7:8 - Dying Priests And Living Testimony

And here men that die receive tithes; but there he receiveth them, of whom it is witnessed that he liveth.

Exegesis

- **“Here”** describes the Levitical side of the comparison; **“there”** describes the Melchisedec side.
- Levitical priests are mortal. Each priest’s ministry ends, requiring another priest to take his place. Their legal authority cannot overcome death.
- On the other side stands the scriptural testimony concerning Melchisedec: **“he liveth.”** This recalls verse 3, where he “abideth a priest continually.”
- The Christophany reading understands this as Melchisedec’s personal continuing life. The typological reading understands the Genesis record as presenting a priest with no recorded death or successor. Both readings must preserve the writer’s contrast: dying priests stand opposite a living and continuing priestly testimony.

- Hebrews will apply this permanence directly to Jesus in verses 23-25. His continuing life means His priesthood needs no successor.

Closely Relevant Cross-References

- **Numbers 20:25-29** - Aaron dies and his priestly garments pass to Eleazar.
- **Psalm 110:4** - God testifies to a priest for ever after Melchizedek’s order.
- **Hebrews 7:3** - Melchisedec “abideth a priest continually.”
- **Hebrews 7:23-25** - Jesus continues ever and possesses an unchangeable priesthood.

What The Passage Does Not Say

- It does not report a contemporary earthly collection of tithes by Melchisedec.
- It does not make a present-tense verb alone settle every question about Melchisedec’s identity.

Hebrews 7:9-10 - Levi Pays Through Abraham

And as I may so say, Levi also, who receiveth tithes, payed tithes in Abraham.

For he was yet in the loins of his father, when Melchisedec met him.

Exegesis

- **“As I may so say”** means **so to speak**. The writer marks this as representative reasoning. Levi was not personally present in Genesis 14.
- Levi normally appears on the receiving side of Israel’s tithes. Here that position is reversed: **in Abraham**, Levi is placed on the paying side of the transaction.
- Levi was still **“in the loins”** of Abraham: he belonged to the future line descending through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Abraham acts as the ancestor from whom the Levitical tribe will come.
- The logical force is not that every action of every ancestor is automatically charged to every descendant. Hebrews applies the relationship to this specific comparison of priestly orders.
- If Abraham acknowledged Melchisedec’s priestly greatness, and Levi was representatively present in Abraham, then Levi also stands beneath Melchisedec in the comparison.
- The argument is now complete: **Abraham paid Melchisedec; Melchisedec blessed Abraham; and Levi, still in Abraham, “so to speak” paid Melchisedec. Therefore, the priesthood represented by Melchisedec is superior to the Levitical priesthood.**

Closely Relevant Cross-References

- **Genesis 14:20** - Abraham is the historical person who gives the tenth.
- **Genesis 29:34** - Levi is born generations later as a son of Jacob and Leah.
- **Genesis 46:26; Exodus 1:5** - Scripture uses loins as ancestry language for later descendants.
- **Hebrews 7:11** - The completed comparison leads to the question of whether perfection could come through Levi’s priesthood.

Text And Translation Notes

- **“Paid”** is the KJV’s older spelling of **paid**.
- **“Father”** can mean ancestor. Abraham is Levi’s forefather, not his immediate parent.
- The qualifying phrase **“as I may so say”** should remain in any explanation. It guards against treating Levi as a conscious participant in the event.

What The Passage Does Not Say

- It does not teach that Levi consciously existed before his birth.
- It does not establish a universal doctrine that every descendant bears every deed of every ancestor.
- It does not say Christ paid tithes through Abraham. The writer applies this comparison specifically to Levi before distinguishing Christ’s priesthood by another tribe, God’s oath, and endless life.

Teaching Summary

The Central Claim

The passage is not primarily about the percentage Abraham gave. It is about **the priest to whom he gave it**. Abraham's tithe and Melchisedec's blessing establish Melchisedec's superior priestly position. Levi's representative participation in Abraham then brings the Levitical order beneath Melchisedec's order.

The Two Sides Of The Comparison

- **The Levitical side:** later priests descend from Abraham through Isaac, Jacob, and Levi. They receive tithes from their fellow Israelites because the Mosaic Law commands it. They are mortal men whose service must pass to successors.
- **The Melchisedec side:** before Levi was born and before the Law established Aaron's priesthood, Melchisedec was already recognized as the priest of the Most High God. He received a tenth from Abraham, blessed Abraham, and is presented by Scripture in connection with continuing life.
- **The decisive relationship:** the Levitical priests do not rise above Abraham merely because they receive tithes from their brethren. Melchisedec, however, receives from Abraham himself and blesses the man who holds the promises.
- **The representative consequence:** Levi comes from Abraham. Therefore, when Abraham acknowledges Melchisedec's priestly greatness, the later Levitical line is included in that acknowledgment "so to speak."

Put It In Plain Language

Suppose someone asks, "How can Abraham's action say anything about priests born centuries later?" Hebrews answers through ancestry. Levi's entire priestly line was still future when Abraham met Melchisedec. Yet that line would come from Abraham. The ancestor who stood above Levi stood beneath Melchisedec in this priestly exchange. Therefore, Levi cannot claim a priestly rank above the one whom Abraham acknowledged.

The argument does **not** say that Melchisedec replaced Abraham in God's covenant plan. Nor does it say the Levitical priesthood was fraudulent. It says that Scripture itself recognizes a priestly order that is earlier, greater, and not dependent upon Levi.

Why This Matters For Jesus

- A Hebrew hearer might object that Jesus came from Judah rather than Levi and therefore could not be a legitimate priest under Aaron's rules.
- Hebrews does not squeeze Jesus into Aaron's genealogy. It points to a different order already recognized in Genesis and later confirmed by God's oath in **Psalm 110:4**.
- **Hebrews 7:11** asks why God promised another order if Levi's priesthood brought perfection.

- Jesus' priesthood rests upon God's appointment and His endless life, not upon descent from Aaron. The hearers therefore lose nothing by trusting Him; they receive the greater Priest announced by their own Scriptures.

A Christian-Audience Guardrail

The Christian application is not, "Abraham tithed, so Christians must tithe." That moves away from the writer's stated comparison. The proper movement is:

1. Observe what Abraham's tithe and blessing reveal about Melchisedec.
2. Follow Levi's representative relationship to Abraham.
3. Recognize the superiority of Melchisedec's priestly order.
4. Understand why Jesus' non-Levitical priesthood is not a defect but the fulfillment of God's sworn promise.

A Careful Teaching Sequence

- Begin with **Abraham**, the revered patriarch and holder of the promises.
- Follow the two directional actions: **Abraham gives upward; Melchisedec blesses downward**.
- Introduce **Levi** only after that relationship is clear.
- Emphasize "**so to speak**": Levi participates representatively through his ancestor.
- State the conclusion narrowly and clearly: **Melchisedec's priesthood is superior to Levi's priesthood**.
- Then look ahead: if Jesus is appointed after Melchisedec's order, His priesthood cannot be dismissed for lacking Levitical descent.

Review The Reasoning

- **Who historically paid the tenth?** Abraham.
- **Who received it and gave the blessing?** Melchisedec, priest of the Most High God.
- **Who is "the less" in verse 7?** Abraham, relative to Melchisedec's priestly position.
- **How did Levi pay?** Not personally, but "so to speak" through Abraham, his ancestor.
- **What does the passage prove?** The priesthood represented by Melchisedec is greater than the Levitical priesthood.
- **What does it prepare the reader to accept?** Jesus as the divinely appointed and enduring Priest after Melchisedec's order.

One-sentence summary: Abraham's tenth, Melchisedec's blessing, and Levi's representative payment through Abraham demonstrate that the enduring priesthood represented by Melchisedec is greater than the mortal Levitical order.