

Who is Melchizedek?

In Genesis 14, readers encounter Melchizedek, the King of Salem and priest of “the Most High God.” Abram responds by accepting a blessing from this king/priest and paying a tithe in recognition of his superiority. This enigmatic figure shows up two other places in the Bible, Psalms and Hebrews, where Melchizedek is a typology for the idealized Messianic king and Christ himself. How did Melchizedek go from a pagan priest-king to a forerunner of the Messiah?

Old Testament	Intertestamental Period	New Testament
<p>Gen. 14:18ff –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">King of SalemPriest of “God Most High” – <i>el elyon</i> (Canaanite deity)Pronounces blessing on Abram by “God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth”Blesses “God Most High” for defeating enemiesAbram gives a tenth of the war spoilsAbram swears using different name – <i>el yhwh</i> followed by <i>el elyon</i> <p>Psalm 110:4 –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">A messianic psalm celebrating the coronation of the ideal priest-kingReferred to repeatedly in the New Testament as ChristKing given priestly status in “the order of Melchizedek” (v.4)Merging of kingship duties - war, judgment – and priestly duties – “a priest forever”Some translators see a reference to priest-king figure as supernatural in v.3 (“like the <i>Day Star, son of Dawn</i>, I have begotten thee” – a reference to Isa. 14:12)	<p>Hasmonean Dynasty (163 – 63 BCE)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Rebelling against Hellenist rulers, a priestly family leads a revolt to restore Jewish rule and religious hegemony (as told in 1 Maccabees)After successfully establishing (limited) Jewish independence, family names themselves high priests AND kings, merging the roles by appealing to example of Melchizedek <p>Other Period Literature –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Melchizedek explicitly given heavenly attributes to explain the presence of a non-Levitical priestDead Sea Scrolls – becomes an angelic figure (Michael – “Prince of Light”) who judges the unbelieving world and delivers “sons of light”2nd Enoch – expands on heavenly mythology of Melchizedek via birth story in days of Noah<ul style="list-style-type: none">Has no father or mother, springs from his mother’s womb fully developed and clothed with “the badge of priesthood” on his chest; speaks and blesses the LordCarried away to heaven to escape Noah’s FloodPhilo of Alexander – identifies Melchizedek with the eternal “Logos” (cf. with John 1)	<p>Hebrews Ch. 7 –</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Uses some of the Intertestamental speculation on Melchizedek to elevate Christ (not endorsing these views however)Largely an exposition of Psalm 110Titles explicitly translated the same as other 1st c. Jewish sources (Josephus and Philo Judeas)Writer uses Melchizedek to make 3 points to show superiority of Jesus –<ul style="list-style-type: none">Melchizedek’s lack of genealogy (v.3) suggests immortality (basis of priesthood is indestructible life)Melchizedek’s reception of tithes (vv.9-10) show he is superior to Abram (and his Levitical descendants)Blessing of Abram by Melchizedek demonstrates superiority (inferior receives blessing)Jesus, being “of the order of Melchizedek” is therefore of a superior priesthood than the Levites <p>Picture of Melchizedek as eternal, co-existent with Christ led to various heresies in Early Church including a sect that held Melchizedek as equal or superior to Christ</p>