

APPENDIX

* * * SHEM AS MELCHIZEDEK * * *

S.L.H.
Soli Deo Gloria!

“Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like unto the Son of God, abideth a priest continually.”
(Hebrews 7:3)

Many Christian expositors seem unwilling to seriously wrestle with the identity of Melchizedek in Genesis 14:18-20, simply defaulting to binning it in the category of a Christophany. A straightforward exegesis of Hebrews 7:1-3, however, does not support that interpretation.

The record of Melchizedek in the O.T. is extremely brief (Gen14:18-20; Ps110:4), but profoundly significant. Melchizedek was both “king of Salem” (i.e., Jerusalem; Ps76:2) and “priest of the Most High God” (Heb7:1-2). By God’s design, the offices of king and priest could never be held by one man under the Mosaic Covenant, but this was not the case before the founding of the nation of Israel.

More than a name, Melchizedek is a title: “King of righteousness” (Heb7:2). Note that in Hebrews 7:1, Paul directs our attention to “this Melchizedek” (i.e., there were other Melchizedekian priests). Along with King of Salem (Hebrew, *shalom*), which means “King of peace”, these titles certainly have profound messianic overtones (Cp., Isa9:6; 11:4; Jer23:5-6). The fact that Abraham gave to Melchizedek “a tenth part” of the spoils taken at the “slaughter of the kings” (Heb7:1; Gen14:20), and Melchizedek “blessed¹” Abraham (Gen14:19), is a clear indication that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham (Heb7:7).

Many have believed that Hebrews 7:3 teaches that Melchizedek was a Christophany (a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ). But rather than teaching that Melchizedek was Christ, this verse asserts the opposite; Melchizedek was “made like unto the Son of God”, meaning he was not literally Christ, but merely a **type** of Christ.

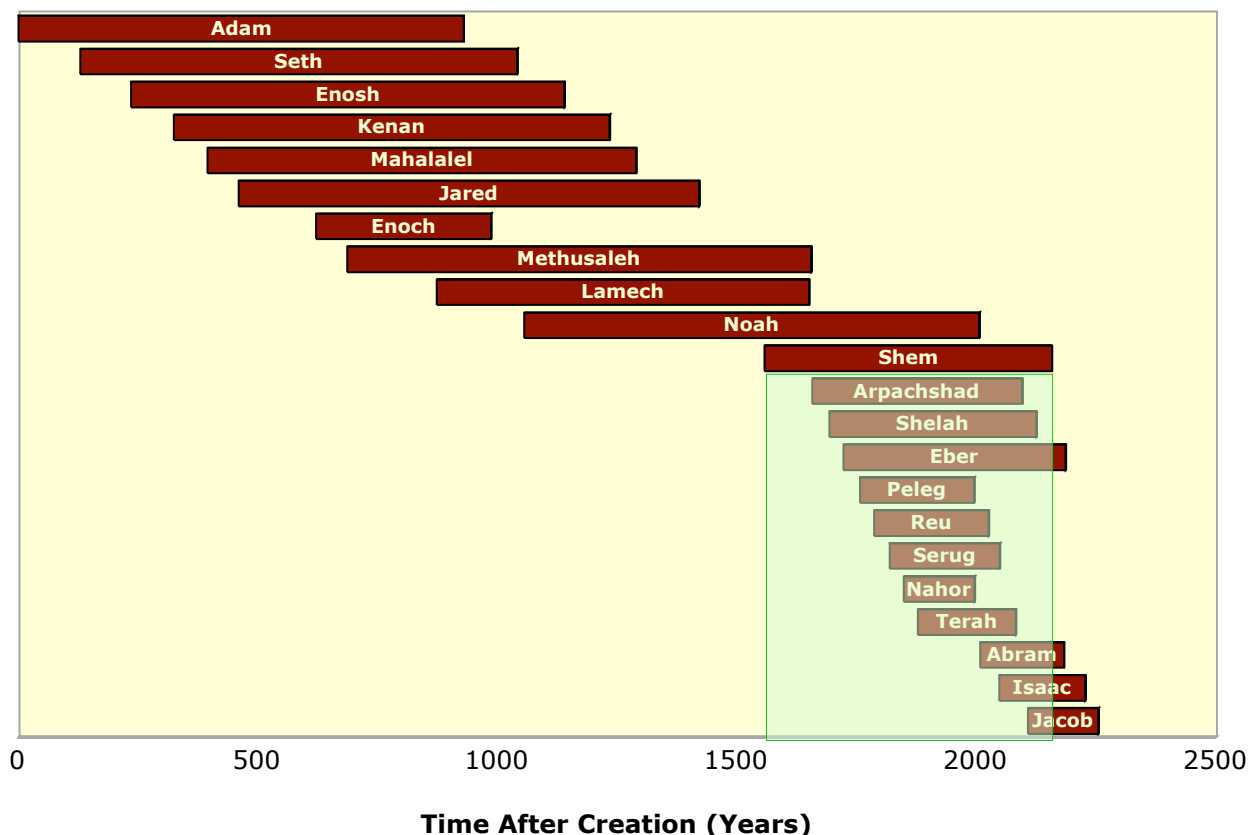
The description of Melchizedek as “without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days nor end of life” superficially appears to describe an eternal person (which, if true, would support Melchizedek being a Christophany). However, Hebrews 7:6 clarifies that Melchizedek did indeed have a “descent”, but that it was distinct from Levi. Paul has in mind the order of Melchizedek, in contrast to the order of Aaron; this extended characterization emphasizes that scripture gives no record of Melchizedek’s genealogy, which stands in stark contrast to the Aaronic priesthood, in which it was required that a priest be able to document his physical descent from Aaron (Exod29:9), or later Zadok (1Kgs2:27:35). The priesthood of Melchizedek is not hereditary, as Aaron’s was, so genealogy is irrelevant. Furthermore, an Aaronic priest’s “beginning of days” (i.e., birthday) had to be known, since he was only permitted to serve in the Temple

¹ Melchizedek’s (i.e., Shem’s) blessing of Abraham was actually his ordination into the Melchizedekian priesthood.

from age 30 to 50 (cf. Num4:3,23,30,47), in contrast to Melchizedek who “abideth a priest continually”.

If Melchizedek was not Christ, who was he? He must be a person of great importance, greater even than Abraham. Jewish tradition identifies Melchizedek as **Shem** (Jasher² 16:11), the divinely blessed son of Noah (Gen9:26) and ancient forefather of Abraham, which finds some support in Hebrews 7:3. Shem lived during an unprecedented period of time, being born before the Flood but living long after it (Cp., Gen5:32; 7:11; 11:10-11). TABLE 1 displays information from the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11. The shaded **green** box under Shem highlights a phenomenon that was unique to the generations represented in the Genesis 11 genealogy. Namely, the rapid decay in human longevity that took place after the Flood gave rise to the strange phenomenon of prior generations outliving subsequent ones, until human lifespans stabilized somewhat during the days of Jacob. This phenomenon was especially exaggerated for Shem, as he can be observed to have lived contemporaneously with 15 generations (11 of which came after him), being alive even in the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. From their human perspective, Shem (as Melchizedek) could certainly be described as one “having neither beginning of days nor end of life”.

TABLE 1. The 15 Generations of Shem.



² The Book of Jasher is not inspired, nor is it without errors. However, the Bible mentions the Book of Jasher approvingly (cf. Josh10:13; 2Sam1:18), and at times includes information from it in the Scriptures (i.e., 2Tim3:8). Much of its content was incorporated into the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud, indicating that Jewish sages regarded its historical information to be reliable. At a minimum, it reflects Jewish thinking on matters of ancient Biblical history.

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