

Hebrews and Orthodox Trinitarianism: Melchizedek and the Christ

Paper #4

Introduction

The Central Biblical Passage

The text that is central to the purpose of this paper is *Hebrews* 7:1–28. I begin by citing the text that is at issue from the New American Standard version:

7:1 For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him,

7:2 to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all *the spoils*, was first of all, by the translation of *his name*, king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace.

7:3 Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually.

7:4 Now observe how great this man was to whom Abraham, the patriarch, gave a tenth of the choicest spoils.

7:5 And those indeed of the sons of Levi who receive the priest's office have commandment in the Law to collect a tenth from the people, that is, from their brethren, although these are descended from Abraham.

7:6 But the one whose genealogy is not traced from them collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed the one who had the promises.

7:7 But without any dispute the lesser is blessed by the greater.

7:8 In this case mortal men receive tithes, but in that case one *receives them*, of whom it is witnessed that he lives on.

7:9 And, so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes,

7:10 for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him.

7:11 Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need *was there* for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron?

7:12 For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also.

7:13 For the one concerning whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no one has officiated at the altar.

7:14 For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests.

7:15 And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek,

7:16 who has become *such* not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life.

7:17 For it is attested *of Him*, "YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK."

7:18 For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness

7:19 (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.

7:20 And inasmuch as *it was* not without an oath

7:21 (for they indeed became priests without an oath, but He with an oath through the One who said to Him, "THE LORD HAS SWORN AND WILL NOT CHANGE HIS MIND, 'YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER'");

7:22 so much the more also Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.

7:23 The *former* priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing,

7:24 but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently.

7:25 Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

7:26 For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens;

7:27 who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the *sins* of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.

7:28 For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, *appoints* a Son, made perfect forever.

The Purpose of This Paper

One thing that many traditional Trinitarians construe as support for the doctrine of the Trinity is the alleged identification of Jesus with Melchizedek in *Hebrews 7*. One common interpretation of *Hebrews 7* understands Paul to be suggesting that Melchizedek was a Christophany, a visible appearance of the Christ to Abraham. This interpretation has nothing to contribute to the doctrine of the trinity *per se*. But it does have implications for the pre-existence of Christ. If it is right—if Melchizedek is the Christ manifesting himself to Abraham—then the Christ already existed in the time of Abraham. How else could he appear to him? But if the Christ already existed in the time of Abraham, then it becomes plausible to think that he existed even earlier—notably, before the creation of the world.

Any implications this has for Trinitarian doctrine are only indirect. Orthodox Trinitarianism clearly involves the following belief: being the second person of an eternal triune godhead, the divine person who became incarnate as the Christ is himself eternal and existed prior to any created reality. If this divine person who eventually became incarnate as the Christ existed prior to creation—as Orthodox Trinitarianism suggests—then it is utterly plausible that he could have manifested himself visibly to Abraham thousands of years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem. So, the possibility of Melchizedek being a Christophany is entirely plausible under the Trinitarian view. But, on alternative views of the incarnation—notably, on any view that suggests that the Son of God did not begin to exist until Jesus, the child born of Mary, came into existence—it would be utterly impossible for the Christ, the Son of God, to appear to Abraham. The Son of God cannot appear to Abraham if he does not yet exist. So, on any such non-Trinitarian views, Melchizedek could not possibly be a Christophany.

Transcendent Monotheism (the view that I currently espouse) understands the Son of God to first come into existence when Jesus was conceived and born of Mary. Prior to Jesus' conception, the unique Son of God whom God had promised did not yet exist in any actual sense. He was a promise in the purposes of God; but he was not yet an actual being within the cosmos. If I am right about this, then the Son of God did not exist in any form, or in any sense, that would allow him to appear to Abraham thousands of years earlier. As we can see, then, *Hebrews 7* is an important touchstone for one's doctrine of the incarnation. If *Hebrews 7* clearly and incontrovertibly requires Melchizedek to be a Christophany, then *Hebrews 7* clearly rules out Transcendent Monotheism's understanding of the incarnation. But it would be utterly compatible with Orthodox Trinitarianism and its understanding of the incarnation. Discovering that Melchizedek is incontrovertibly understood to be a Christophany in *Hebrews 7* would not decisively PROVE Trinitarian doctrine. But it would decisively ELIMINATE Transcendent Monotheism as a viable alternative to Trinitarian doctrine.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine the status of the Melchizedek-as-Christophany interpretation of *Hebrews 7*. Is such an interpretation required by the

argument of *Hebrews* 7? Or—if not required—is it the reading that is most likely correct? These are the questions we wish to answer.

To be clear about what is at stake: if intelligent interpretation of *Hebrews* 7 requires that Melchizedek be a Christophany, such a fact would not decisively prove the doctrine of the Trinity, nor would it prove its understanding of the incarnation. But it would disprove Transcendent Monotheism's view of the incarnation; and Transcendent Monotheism would be eliminated as a viable alternative to Orthodox Trinitarianism. Therefore, if one wants to embrace Transcendent Monotheism with biblical integrity and intellectual consistency, he must demonstrate that *Hebrews* 7 does not require that we understand Melchizedek to be a Christophany. That is the purpose of this paper.

Melchizedek as Christophany: Initial Evaluation

Why would anyone ever conclude that Melchizedek is a Christophany in the first place? For, at first glance, it does not seem likely. A straightforward reading of the relevant Genesis account does not incline one to such a conclusion.

Genesis 14:17–24 is the only biblical account that tells us anything about Melchizedek. The chapter begins with the description of a military conquest wherein Lot and his fellow townsmen from Sodom are taken captive by the armies of a four-king alliance headed by Chedorlaomer, king of Elam. Having heard of Lot's capture, Abraham executes a heroic rescue of Lot and the other people of Sodom. After Abraham and his men had defeated the armies of Chedorlaomer and freed Lot from captivity, the account continues:

“Then after his {Abraham's} return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. Now he was a priest of God Most High. He blessed him {Abraham} and said, “Blessed be Abram of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.” He {Abraham} gave him {Melchizedek} a tenth of all.

The king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give the people to me and take the goods for yourself.” Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have sworn to YHWH, God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours, for fear you would say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’ I will take nothing except what the young men have eaten. And the share of the men who went with me, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre, let them take their share.”

Genesis 14:17–24, NASV [modified]

What might one reasonably conclude from this account about the nature and identity of Melchizedek? The text explicitly states two things about Melchizedek that are of

relevance to his identity: (i) He was the king of Salem at the time; and (ii) He was a priest to the Most High God at the time. Let's examine each of these assertions:

- (i) A reasonable inference from the biblical record, in conjunction with biblical archaeology, is that Salem (the city that would eventually be captured by Israel under King David, made David's residence, and renamed Jerusalem) was, at the time of Abraham, a Jebusite city. Accordingly, the text of Genesis 14 is asserting that Melchizedek is the king of a Jebusite city-state named Salem. Melchizedek, therefore, is likely a Jebusite, that is, a Canaanite.¹
- (ii) Melchizedek is said to be a priest to the God Most High. Or, in the Hebrew language, Melchizedek is a priest of 'el 'elyon. The most natural context for the concept of a god "Most High" is the context of ancient polytheism. The "Most High God" is that god in a people's pantheon of gods who is supreme. He is the god over all the other gods; he controls and dictates the behaviors of all the other gods. In the view of a polytheistic people, the God Most High is the god who ultimately orders and shapes their lives and realities. He, therefore, is the most important of all the gods that they worship. Mention of the "God Most High," therefore, suggests that these Jebusites, like all of the other Canaanites at that time, embrace the polytheistic worldview typical of the ancient world. Undoubtedly they worship their gods in a manner akin to how all the other ancient polytheists worship their gods. So, in all likelihood, these Jebusites practice the same rituals that are practiced by ancient polytheism generally. Genesis 14, therefore, is suggesting that Melchizedek functions as a priest who serves the most supreme god in the Jebusite pantheon. He performs those ancient polytheistic rituals that constitute the worship of this god.

Now, neither of these conclusions is compatible with Melchizedek being a Christophany. If Melchizedek is a Jebusite who has been exalted by his people to be king over them, and if he has been appointed to function as a priest to their most supreme god, then he is not a Christophany. Rather, he is a man of Canaanite descent, an ordinary human being who played an unusual role in the early history of God's people. So, if the text of Genesis 14 describes Melchizedek in a way that clearly suggests that he is an ordinary human being, then why would anyone ever conclude that he is a Christophany? Clearly, it is not on the basis of Genesis 14.

No, the conclusion that Melchizedek is a Christophany arises from a set of assertions that Paul makes about him in *Hebrews* 7. Let us examine the five most important assertions that lead some interpreters to conclude that Paul understood Melchizedek to have been a Christophany:

- (1) In *Hebrews* 7:3, Paul says of Melchizedek that he is "without father, without mother, without genealogy." Paul could never write such a thing of Melchizedek—

¹ The Jebusites were one of the several people groups that constituted the Canaanites.

the reasoning goes—if he believed him to be an ordinary human being. It makes no sense to say of an ordinary human being that he is “without father, without mother, without genealogy.” Clearly, then, Paul cannot believe Melchizedek to be an ordinary human being. But, if not an ordinary human being, what does he think he is? It seems evident from 7:14 that Paul believes that Melchizedek is one and the same individual as Jesus. This would explain why Paul does not take Melchizedek to be an ordinary Jebusite. He cannot be an ordinary Jebusite if he is one and the same individual as Jesus. The only reasonable explanation for Paul’s assertion in 7:3, then, is that he takes Melchizedek to be a Christophany. In other words, Melchizedek is an earlier manifestation to Abraham of the same divine Son of God who eventually incarnates himself as Jesus.² This, it could be argued, is what Paul has in mind when he asserts that he is “without father, without mother, without genealogy.”

- (2) In *Hebrews* 7:3, again, Paul asserts of Melchizedek that he has “neither beginning of days, nor end of life.” How could it be said of a Jebusite priest-king that he has “neither beginning of days, nor end of life”? Since it most certainly cannot be said of a Jebusite priest-king, Paul must not be thinking of Melchizedek as such. Who, then, does Paul think that Melchizedek is? He must certainly be thinking that Melchizedek is an eternal being. (*Hebrews* 7:8 is further confirmation of this: “of whom it is witnessed that he lives on.”) And how else can Melchizedek be an eternal being who is identical with Jesus (note *Hebrews* 7:14) except by being a Christophany?
- (3) In *Hebrews* 7:3, yet again, Paul asserts of Melchizedek that “being made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually.” Surely, it could not be said of a Jebusite priest-king that he “remains a priest perpetually.” Therefore, Paul most certainly is not viewing Melchizedek as a Jebusite priest-king. Once again, we see that Paul views Melchizedek as an eternal being. And how else can Melchizedek

² How one reconciles this with the Genesis account is problematic. Presumably, Melchizedek being a Christophany would imply that he was only a temporary, spontaneous appearance of the Christ to Abraham. By its very nature, a Christophany is not the sort of being who has a permanent, identifiable social and political role in relation to other historical persons. Note that in no known theophany in the Scriptures is the theophanic personage given a name, let alone a social and political role or function in relation to other ordinary humans. (The burning bush on Mt. Sinai does not identify himself as Peter, Czar of Russia, for example.) So, if Melchizedek is a Christophany, why is he assigned the role of king of Salem and priest to God Most High? Do the residents of Salem know that he is the king of Salem? Do the Jebusite people in Salem bring their offerings to Melchizedek? How long has this Christophany been in existence? How long has he ruled as king? Was he born of a mother that the people of Salem acknowledge as his mother? When one suggests that Melchizedek is a Christophany, is he, in fact, suggesting that Melchizedek is a Christophany RATHER THAN the king of Salem and priest of the God Most High? Is one claiming that he is only MASQUERADING as the king of Salem and priest of the God Most High? That, actually, he is a Christophany instead of being the actual historical king of Salem? To say the least, that would be a rather odd interpretation of the text of Genesis.

be an eternal being who is identical with Jesus (note *Hebrews* 7:14) except by being a Christophany? This conclusion seems all the more evident in view of the fact that Paul writes, "being made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually." Is this not an explicit assertion that Melchizedek is a Christophany? Is Paul not saying that it is precisely because he is a Christophany that he is a priest PERPETUALLY? Melchizedek is "made like the Son of God" precisely in the sense that he is the Christophanic manifestation of the Son of God. That is what Paul explicitly intends to assert here.

- (4) In the argument that Paul makes in *Hebrews* 7:4–10, Paul maintains that Melchizedek is GREATER than Abraham. Not only that, but, by being greater than Abraham, he is also greater than the whole tribe of Levites and priests that are descended from Abraham. Surely Paul could never suggest that a Jebusite priest-king is greater than Abraham and the priests descended from him. It would be unthinkable to think that a Canaanite priest is more exalted than an Israelite priest. Therefore, the only way this argument makes any sense is if Paul believes that Melchizedek is the eternal Son of God. Certainly the eternal Son of God is greater than Abraham and all his priestly descendents. But, it is with equal certainty that a Canaanite priest-king is not.
- (5) Finally, in *Hebrews* 7:15-16, Paul says of Jesus, "And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become *such* not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life." Paul is suggesting that one of the important things that makes Jesus like Melchizedek is "the power of an indestructible life." A Jebusite priest-king does not have the "power of an indestructible life." The only way that Jesus and Melchizedek can share an "indestructible life" in common is if both of them embody one and the same eternal being, the eternal Son of God. Hence, this assertion only makes sense if Paul understands Melchizedek to be a Christophany.

In view of all the above considerations, one is faced with a serious dilemma: on the one hand, a reasonable and intelligent reading of the Genesis 14 account would lead one to take Melchizedek to be a Jebusite priest-king; but, on the other hand, a *prima facie* understanding of Paul's argument in *Hebrews* 7 is that Paul takes Melchizedek to be a Christophany. What are we to make of that? How do we solve this dilemma? It would certainly appear that Paul's argument in *Hebrews* 7 is based on an unreasonable and unintelligent reading of Genesis 14. How, then, are we to respond to Paul's argument in *Hebrews* 7? We can respond in one of four ways:

- (A) We can decide that Paul's interpretation of Genesis 14 is idiotic, irresponsible, tendentious, and, therefore unconvincing and that, therefore, his conclusions are completely invalid and have no legitimacy at all.

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- (B) We can decide that, while Paul's interpretation of Genesis 14 may appear, on the surface, to be invalid, it is, on closer examination, a reasonable, intelligent, and valid interpretation after all.
- (C) We can decide that Paul, being an apostle, has an inspired understanding of the Genesis 14 account that would never be discoverable by or evident to an uninspired reader. Hence, we can decide to embrace Paul's conclusions—not on the authority of the biblical text of Genesis 14, but on the authority of Paul's personal understanding as an inspired and authoritative apostle.
- (D) We can decide that we have completely misconstrued what sort of argument Paul is making in *Hebrews* 7. Perhaps Paul is making an argument that does not hinge on a Christophanic understanding of Melchizedek in Genesis 14.

I will evaluate each of these four possible responses below.

Evaluation of the First Possible Response to Our Dilemma: Response A

For anyone who rejects both biblical and apostolic authority, it is a viable option to decide that Paul simply does not know what he is talking about. Paul could be incompetent, ignorant, irresponsible, or, worse, dishonest. But, if one is committed to biblical and apostolic authority, this is not a viable option. If Paul is wrong in his interpretation of the Bible, his whole understanding and explanation of the Christian faith is called into question. Therefore, one cannot make this choice lightly. To decide to reject the legitimacy of Paul's argument here is to call into question an authority who stands as a foundational pillar of the Christian faith itself. A believer who is committed to the authority of Paul and to the authority of the Bible will not adopt this response unless he is left with no other responsible option. And, if he is forced to concede that Paul has completely misinterpreted Genesis, then he must correspondingly reevaluate his belief in Paul's gospel itself. For, how Paul understands the Old Testament scriptures is foundational to how he understands the gospel itself. If he is wrong in the former, he might very well be wrong in the latter. One must not dismiss Paul lightly therefore. If Paul is irresponsible as a biblical exegete, he may be just as irresponsible as an evangelist. And if Paul is irresponsible as an evangelist, then why do we believe him at all? Such questions would need to be taken seriously.

Evaluation of the Second Possible Response to Our Dilemma: Response B

Perhaps we can conclude that Paul's Christophanic interpretation of Genesis 14 is a reasonable and intelligent interpretation of the Genesis account after all. But the only way one can reach such a conclusion is through a complete reconsideration of what biblical interpretation is, and perhaps, therefore, of what the Bible is.

A foundational assumption of rational, commonsensical biblical interpretation is that there is one and only one level of meaning to any biblical text. Specifically, a biblical text means what the human author of that text intended it to mean. Responsible, serious

exegesis rejects the facile, *ad hoc* view that a text can mean something other than what its author intended.

Hebrews 7 is a great example of why biblical interpreters become tempted to depart from this commonsensical position. It is not difficult to see that the author of Genesis 14 intended to describe a Jebusite priest-king who met Abraham and blessed him. So, when it appears that Paul (in *Hebrews 7*) understands the Melchizedek of Genesis 14 to be a Christophany, what is the bible student to do? In order to avoid the conclusion that Paul is horribly mistaken, the interpreter of *Hebrews 7* is tempted to suggest that the Genesis story means two very different and incompatible things at the same time. On the one hand, it can legitimately be understood to describe Melchizedek as a Jebusite priest-king; on the other hand, it can—at the same time—be understood to reveal a hidden truth from God—that Melchizedek was a Christophany. In other words, the bible student who is anxious to save Paul from illegitimate exegesis reasons as follows: “There must be two distinct levels as which the text of Genesis has meaning. On the one level, the text means what it appears to mean on its surface. It means what the human author used the language of that text to express. But on another level, the very same text has a hidden meaning that God intended to reveal by means of it. This other hidden meaning is an entirely separate and distinct meaning. It bears no relationship to the first level of meaning, the meaning intended by the human author.” This line of reasoning is utterly *ad hoc*. It is embraced, without much thought to its implications, purely to avoid the conclusion that Paul is mistaken in his interpretation of Genesis. If the book of *Hebrews* had never been written, no bible student would have ever concluded that Genesis 14 had two different levels of meaning! Apart from having to salvage Paul’s “misinterpretation” of *Hebrews 7*, every bible student would be perfectly content to understand Melchizedek as a Jebusite priest-king. The fact that the interpreter’s positing of a second level of meaning is so clearly *ad hoc* should raise serious questions about how legitimate such a belief is. If it were legitimate, it would recommend itself to the interpreter in any and every biblical text. The fact that we rarely propose a second, hidden meaning to a text except when we need to salvage an apostle’s “bad” exegesis of a text means—I would suggest—that we don’t actually believe that it is legitimate exegesis.

Indeed, I would maintain that it is not legitimate. Given the intrinsic nature of verbal communication, it is not possible for a text to mean something that is unconnected to what its author intended. Language is the tool one uses to communicate what he is thinking. To communicate, I offer clues to the other person with the expectation that the other person will be able, by means of those clues, to successfully reconstruct what it is that I hold in his mind. I want him to make contact with a certain aspect of what I am thinking. I give him the clues whereby he can do so. The clues I give him are in the language that I use when I verbalize to him. Grasping that single important fact about language has a critically important ramification: it is not LANGUAGE that means; it is the PERSON who uses language that means something. Accordingly, it is inherently impossible for language to mean something apart from what the author of that language means; for it is the *author* that means in the first place, *not* his language. His language

supplies clues to his meaning. But, in and of itself, his language has no intrinsic meaning. The one and only meaning of any language act resides in the meaning of its author. Language interpreted without regard to what its author intended is a flight of fantasy. A fertile imagination might very well be able to propose something plausible; but not because the language can actually mean what I imagine, for apart from an author's intended meaning, language means nothing.³

Consider Genesis 14 in this regard. When I am reading the story recorded there, what is being conveyed by the language of that account? What is being conveyed is the understanding of a historical event as that exists in the mind of the author of that account. Interpretation is the act of making contact with and replicating in my own understanding the understanding that exists in the mind of the storyteller. So, there is one and only one result that can legitimately constitute the act of interpretation: when I successfully replicate the understanding of that event as it exists in the mind of the storyteller, the author of the text. By the intrinsic nature of what interpretation is then, there cannot be more than one interpretation of Genesis 14 (or any biblical text). Either I successfully reconstruct what is in the mind of the author of the text, or I do not. It is completely illegitimate to offer two different and unrelated reconstructions of the event being described in Genesis 14 and then declare them both valid "meanings" of the text. To do so is to completely misunderstand and misrepresent the very nature of what verbal communication and textual interpretation are.⁴

This same line of reasoning rules out the equally *ad hoc* move that the Genesis text means what GOD meant it to mean rather than what its human author meant it to mean. As a human being, I know how to use the clues of language to grasp the intent of a human communicator. I do *not* know how to use the clues of language to grasp some intelligent mind's meaning assigned to that same language that is other than and distinct from what the human communicator in his context meant. In other words, even if it were possible for God to intend a meaning to the biblical text that is other than and different from what its human author meant, I would have no way of discerning or discovering what God's intended meaning was. I do not (and cannot) know how to understand a

³ When language is disconnected from the mind of an author, when it no longer functions as a set of clues whereby I am to reconstruct the portion of an author's understanding that he wants me to reconstruct, the language ceases to have any meaning. And it ceases to have any meaning, precisely because I could imagine it meaning almost anything.

⁴ One important ramification of the inherent ambiguity of language is that the exact same set of words could be used by another author in another context, with a different intent and purpose, to mean something fundamentally different. This fact does not entail that a sentence can have two distinct levels of meaning. For every communication act is the act of a specific author in a specific context. The act of interpretation is the act of understanding the mind of the actual author in his context. The fact that another hypothetical author in some other context could have asserted the same sentence with a different meaning is completely irrelevant to the task of interpretation. In interpretation, the task is not to decipher the meaning of words; the task is to decipher the meaning of an author in his context.

meaning that is other than what the straightforward, commonsensical meaning of a text is. I could pretend that I could. I could guess at or invent a "meaning," and then dogmatically declare that I know it to have been intended by God. But, in truth, no human being knows how to construe language in any way other than how he knows to construe language. (And that is utterly dependent upon reconstructing the intent of its known author.) To pretend otherwise is irresponsible. So, it will not do to suggest that Paul's Christophanic interpretation of Genesis 14 is actually the one and only true and valid interpretation of Genesis 14 while the Jebusite priest-king interpretation is wrong. No one, interpreting Genesis 14 on its own merits, would ever conclude that Melchizedek was a Christophany.

Evaluation of the Third Possible Response to Our Dilemma: Response C

(3) There is yet another *ad hoc* and facile strategy: to conclude that Paul's analysis of Jesus *vis à vis* Melchizedek is not grounded in, nor the result of, his interpretation of Genesis, but rather is simply the articulation of his inspired understanding—an understanding that he has independently of Genesis 14. As an apostle, Paul understands who Melchizedek truly was. He could not prove it or demonstrate it from the text of Genesis. But he knows who Melchizedek truly was nonetheless. Similarly, he knows who Jesus is by that same inspired understanding. Hence, everything that Paul is saying in *Hebrews 7* should be embraced solely on the basis of his authority and because of his inspired understanding.

This cannot be right. Nothing about the book of *Hebrews* makes any sense if Paul is expecting his readers to believe him implicitly and to grant him authority without dissent. *Hebrews* could have been a much shorter book if that were his approach. The issue, we must remember, is this: given that he was an ordinary human being who managed to get himself crucified by the Romans, how can Jesus be the *messiah*? If Paul need only speak out of his own inspired understanding and apostolic authority, the argument of *Hebrews* could have gone like this: "I am an apostle who has been granted an inspired understanding of the purposes of God. Believe me then, when I tell you that it is entirely consistent with God's purposes that his *messiah* be an ordinary human being and that his *messiah* be crucified by the Romans!" As we read through the book of *Hebrews*, clearly Paul does not simply appeal to his apostolic authority and inspired understanding. He is doing much more than that (and something different from that). He is seeking to show his readers—on the basis of an authority that they are ready and willing to accept—that, according to the Scriptures, it is consistent with God's promises and purposes for the *messiah* be an ordinary human being who gets killed by the Romans. It is vital to Paul's approach in *Hebrews* that his argument from the Old Testament scriptures be something that his readers can grasp, understand, and find persuasive. If they cannot, then Paul is writing to no avail. For his strategy is to show his readers from the Scriptures themselves (an authority that they are not inclined to reject) that Jesus can be the *messiah*. So, if the Scriptures do not mean what Paul says they mean, then his whole argument fails. And if his readers cannot be expected to see for themselves the meaning of the biblical text that

Paul says is there, then Paul's "argument" loses all persuasive power. If his readers cannot understand for themselves that the scripture actually implies what Paul says it implies, then Paul's appeal to those scriptures is to no avail. Clearly, then, Paul's whole rhetorical strategy is to show his readers what the authoritative Scriptures do, in fact, mean and what they do, in fact, entail.

We can see then that the response under discussion here is in conflict with this. It makes no sense to argue that, in *Hebrews* 7, Paul is explaining his inspired understanding of the Christophanic nature of Melchizedek even though that would not be at all evident to an uninspired reader of Genesis 14. To do so would be to ask his readers to trust in his (Paul's) inspired understanding and authority. This is the very thing that they are reluctant to do. This is the very thing Paul knows they are reluctant to do. Virtually nowhere in the book of *Hebrews* does Paul rely on his own authority. On the contrary, throughout the book, Paul seeks to demonstrate FROM A REASONABLE AND INTELLIGENT INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT that Jesus is the *messiah*. He knows that appealing to his own personal authority or inspired understanding of Jesus would be of no avail. If his readers had not already begun to call those things into question, there would be no occasion for his even writing the book. Rather, Paul's agenda is to confirm HIS understanding of the gospel by demonstrating that it is utterly consistent with what the Scriptures themselves teach. His whole argument, then, hinges on whether he has rightly understood the Old Testament scriptures and their implications. So the persuasive power of his argument hinges on his readers being able to see that he has rightly understood the scriptures and their implications. Accordingly, it makes no sense to posit that Paul is relying upon the authority of his own personal understanding and not on the authoritative meaning of the biblical text itself.

Evaluation of the Fourth Possible Response to Our Dilemma: Response D

The only viable option that remains then—apart from believing that Paul is terribly confused—is that we are the ones who are confused. Perhaps we have been very mistaken in what we have understood Paul to be arguing in *Hebrews* 7. Perhaps Paul never intended to suggest that Melchizedek is a Christophany. However much it may appear at first glance that that is what he is suggesting, perhaps deeper and more careful thought about his argument will reveal that he is not basing his argument on the Christophanic nature of Melchizedek at all. If so, then perhaps we will discover that Paul's argument does not conflict with a reasonable interpretation of Genesis 14 at all. That remains to be demonstrated, of course. But before we resort to our first option above—deciding that Paul is wrong and rejecting his understanding altogether—we need to investigate carefully whether there is not a more accurate understanding of Paul's argument in *Hebrews* 7 that is not based on an illegitimate understanding of Melchizedek in the Genesis 14 account.

An Alternative Interpretation of *Hebrews 7*

The Faulty Assumption

There is a faulty assumption that underlies our examination of Paul's argument of *Hebrews 7* so far. We have been assuming that Paul's argument with regard to Melchizedek—if it is based on scripture at all—is an examination of the meaning of Genesis 14. We have assumed that Paul is presenting the meaning of significance of a historical event: the historical blessing of Abraham by the historical personage of Melchizedek. A close examination of Paul's argument in *Hebrews* will make it quite clear that this is not what Paul is doing. To understand what he is doing, we must be familiar with Psalm 110:

A Psalm of David.

110:1 ¶ The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet."

110:2 The LORD will stretch forth Your strong scepter from Zion, *saying*, "Rule in the midst of Your enemies."

110:3 Your people will volunteer freely in the day of Your power; In holy array, from the womb of the dawn, your youth are to You *as* the dew.

110:4 ¶ The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."

110:5 The Lord is at Your right hand; He will shatter kings in the day of His wrath.

110:6 He will judge among the nations, He will fill *them* with corpses, He will shatter the chief men over a broad country.

110:7 He will drink from the brook by the wayside; Therefore He will lift up *His* head.

Psalm 110 (NASV)

Paul's Argument in *Hebrews 7* Re-evaluated

To begin to understand what Paul is doing in *Hebrews 7*, we must first understand the larger argument to which *Hebrews 7* belongs. That larger argument is found in *Hebrews 7:1—10:18*. This section is the central argument of the book. In this section, Paul constructs an extended argument where he intends to demonstrate that Jesus fulfills what was predicted in Psalm 110 concerning the *messiah*. Paul takes it for granted that Psalm 110 is a messianic Psalm—that is, a psalm that in some way concerns the nature

and character of the promised *messiah*.⁵ Paul's focus is on one particularly important assertion in Psalm 110. The critical assertion is one made by YHWH and is addressed to the coming *messiah*. The Psalmist cites YHWH as saying to his *messiah*, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." It is this assertion and what it implies about the coming *messiah* that Paul wants his readers to understand through his argument in *Hebrews*. The *messiah*, he goes on to argue, was sent to function as a priest. Psalm 110 clearly states that. In his capacity as priest, it was crucial that he be an ordinary human being who would represent and mediate for ordinary human beings. And, further, in that capacity, it was necessary for him to offer up a propitiatory offering on behalf of mankind. The propitiatory offering that he was destined to offer was the propitiatory offering of his own life. That is why he voluntarily went to the cross—to die as a propitiatory offering that appealed to God for mercy on behalf of sinful mankind.

Or, from a somewhat different angle, as a "priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek," the coming *messiah* was destined to function as the mediator of a "new" covenant. Under this "new" covenant—for anyone who believes in him—this priest "according to the order of Melchizedek" will truly and effectively secure divine mercy, in a way that the Levitical priests offering up animal sacrifices never could. This promised *messiah* was sent to secure divine mercy by offering himself up as the ultimately effective propitiatory offering. Therefore, Paul argues, Jesus' death on the cross was an essential aspect of the *messiah's* divinely ordained role as our true high priest. Hence, in the light of this critical assertion in Psalm 110, Jesus' humanity and his death most assuredly do NOT disqualify him from being the *messiah*. On the contrary, they are essential and necessary conditions of his being the *messiah*. Only by dying as a human being could Jesus be the true and ultimate high priest predicted in Psalm 110.

Now, for the purposes of this paper, the critical point is the central role that is played by Psalm 110 in Paul's argument—even more, the central role that is played by the specific assertion in Psalm 110 that the coming *messiah* is to be "a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." Paul cites this particular assertion several different times in the book of *Hebrews*.⁶ He cites it in anticipation of the argument that begins with chapter 7 (specifically in 5:1—10 and then again in 6:20). Then, he focuses his whole argument on this assertion beginning in chapter 7. A critical examination of the argument of 7:1—10:18 makes one point quite clear: the argument of this section is nothing more and nothing less than *an exegesis of this specific statement in Psalm 110*: "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." Paul is seeking, on the one hand, to explain what this statement means and, on the other hand, to explore its implications for the nature of the coming *messiah*.

⁵ That it is, in fact, a messianic Psalm is evident from Psalm 110:1–2.

⁶ He cites this assertion specifically in 5:6, 5:10, 6:20, 7:11, 7:15, 7:17 and 7:21. He alludes to this very assertion in several other places within the argument of 7:1–10:18.

This one single fact is critical to understanding rightly what Paul is arguing in *Hebrews 7*. In particular, it is critical to understand that, in *Hebrews 7*, Paul is *not* seeking to understand and interpret the account about Melchizedek in Genesis 14. Rather, Paul is seeking to understand and interpret the assertion that David makes in Psalm 110.

Understanding Psalm 110

If this is right, if *Hebrews 7* is Paul's exploration of the meaning of Psalm 110, then we will be in a better position to understand what Paul is saying in *Hebrews 7* if we form our own independent judgment about what David is doing in Psalm 110. So, how should we understand Psalm 110?

Psalm 110, for the most part, is a poem by David wherein he meditates on the care of YHWH for the coming *messiah*. David addresses this coming *messiah* as "my lord." He then goes on to make a series of statements that reflect the exalted status of this "lord *messiah*" as the one destined to rule with the sovereign authority of YHWH himself.

Here a critical question needs to be answered: on what basis does David make these assertions about the role, destiny, and status of this coming *messiah*? There can be little doubt, I think, that David asserts what he does in this Psalm on the basis of direct revelation he has received from God. Most of what David says is already contained in or implied by what the prophet Nathan said to David when he first revealed the promise of the *messiah*. Presumably, other facets of the *messiah*'s role were revealed to David, over time, through other instances of divine revelation—possibly even to him directly in his capacity as a prophet in his own right. So, what David writes in Psalm 110, is not derived from (or in any way dependent upon) scriptures *per se*. David does not know of the *messiah* through exegesis of the holy writings; he knows of the *messiah* through divine revelation—whether through the prophet Nathan (or other prophets) or through direct revelation.

Nothing in Psalm 110, therefore, is grounded in an exegesis of Genesis 14. When David writes, "YHWH has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek,'" he is not deriving this from Genesis 14. Nothing in Genesis 14 would ever suggest to a reasonable, responsible interpreter that the *messiah*, when he comes, is going to be a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. But neither does anything in Psalm 110 suggest that David thinks it does suggest such a thing. No reasonable reading of Psalm 110 suggests that David is there making an argument from the historical event recorded in Genesis 14. Indeed—unlike what Paul is doing in *Hebrews 7*—David is not making an argument at all. David is simply asserting what he knows. But—and this is another critical point—he is expressing what he knows by means of poetry. Psalm 110 is a poem artfully constructed by David to convey what he knows to be the role, status, and significance of the coming *messiah* whom God had promised. Because Psalm 110 is a poem creatively crafted by David, its mention of Melchizedek is *not* based on an interpretation of Genesis 14, it is based on a *creative invention* of the poet David that makes an *allusion* to Genesis 14. This point is

critical. It is critical to understanding what David is doing in Psalm 110; and it is critical to understanding what Paul is doing in *Hebrews* 7. Specifically, that there exists forever a "priest according to the order of Melchizedek" is a creative invention by David, not a rational inference from the event recorded in Genesis 14.

To make this point clearer, consider a different example. Suppose I constructed a poem about the *messiah* where I asserted with respect to this *messiah*, "You will be loved forever, in accord with the acclaim given to Joe DiMaggio." Nothing in that assertion requires any comparison between Jesus and Joe DiMaggio except one thing: that they both are or will be, at some point in their existence, greatly loved and acclaimed. As a not very skillful poet, I have adopted the historical personage of Joe DiMaggio as a poetical symbol of love and acclaim from the masses. Is there anything about the historical personage of Joe DiMaggio or anything about his life and circumstances that could lead me to infer anything about Jesus, the *messiah*? No, of course not. What I know about Jesus, the *messiah*, is from other sources and on other grounds. I did not infer it from the life of Joe DiMaggio. Joe DiMaggio became how I made my assertion; he is not the basis for why I made the assertion. He is the poetic symbol I creatively adopted to find a way to say what I wanted to say.

This is how we are to understand what David is doing with Melchizedek. Melchizedek does not supply the ground or reason why David asserts what he does about the coming *messiah*. David is not making anything like the following argument: *because Melchizedek was a priest to whom Abraham paid tithes, the messiah will be a priest*. Such an argument would be an utterly fallacious. And nothing like it lies behind David's assertion in Psalm 110. Rather, Melchizedek is the poetic symbol that David creatively invents and adopts that gives him a way to assert what he wants to assert about the *messiah*. David's assertion, therefore, does not require that Genesis 14 prove or reveal the claim he is making about the *messiah*. His assertion alludes to the event in Genesis 14, but it does not cite it as evidence. As a result, Psalm 110 does not require us to find some real historical connection between Jesus (or the *messiah*) and Melchizedek. The connection between the *messiah* and Melchizedek is an imaginative creation of David, the poem-writing prophet. It is not a real connection that exists in actual history.

Understanding *Hebrews* 7

When we get to *Hebrews* 7, then, what is Paul doing? In *Hebrews* 7, Paul is seeking to understand the meaning of Psalm 110. He is seeking to understand the poem that David wrote. He is seeking to understand the prophecy that David has rendered in poetic form. Paul understands, as have we, that David has CREATED the connection between the *messiah* and Melchizedek; he has not DISCOVERED it in the account in Genesis 14.⁷ The connection between the *messiah* and Melchizedek is to be found in Psalm 110. It is a

⁷ It is no surprise, therefore, if we cannot find a connection between Jesus and Melchizedek in the Genesis 14 account. There is no connection there; and Paul is not claiming that there is.

creation of the prophet-poet David; it is not something that exists in the historical event of the Jebusite priest-king blessing Abraham. In *Hebrews 7*, Paul is seeking to understand Psalm 110, a prophetic pronouncement that is based on the prophetic understanding of David. He is not seeking to understand Genesis 14 to be a historical event that anticipates and foreshadows the coming *messiah*.

One could object at this point: but Paul goes to such great lengths to mine the Genesis 14 account for "facts" about Melchizedek. Why would he do that if he were not seeking to understand the significance of Genesis 14 in its own right?⁸ The answer, I think, is this: Paul is seeking to understand exactly what David was thinking when he adopted the figure of Melchizedek for his poetic symbol of the *messiah*'s priestly role.

If indeed David adopted Melchizedek as a poetic symbol of the priestly role of the *messiah*—if indeed that is what he did—then what is it about Melchizedek (as he appears in the Genesis 14 account) that led David to adopt him as such? When Paul—in *Hebrews 7*—rummages around Genesis 14, it is not because he is seeking to find some anticipation or foreshadowing of *Messiah* Jesus there. Rather, he is surveying the data of the text to see if he can reconstruct the imaginative connections that led David to adopt Melchizedek as the poetic representation of the *messiah*'s priesthood.⁹

This leads us to a critical point for understanding *Hebrews 7*. When Paul constructs a list of "facts" about Melchizedek in *Hebrews 7*, he recognizes that—for David's purposes as a poet—David need not base his poetic symbol on the *actual historical* personage of Melchizedek. David could, with equal validity, base his poetic symbol on the *literary* personage of Melchizedek. Accordingly, not all of the "facts" about Melchizedek are—or need be—historically accurate descriptions of Melchizedek, the priest who met and blessed Abraham. This needs some explanation.

Let me introduce two important distinctions: (1) we must distinguish between a person *as he existed in actuality* from a person *as he exists in a narrative account of him*; and (2) we must distinguish between a person *as he actually existed in and of himself*

⁸ The fact that Paul lists several details about Melchizedek from Genesis 14 leads some readers of Hebrew 7 to falsely conclude that Paul is interpreting Genesis 14 and is building an argument for a connection between Jesus and Melchizedek that is based on the character of that historical event. That is not what Paul is doing. Rather, he is trying to understand the creative imagination of the poet David.

⁹ In this regard, note what Psalm 110 says. It says of the *messiah* that he will be a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek. Does David mean to suggest that there actually exists somewhere in the cosmos an order of priests entitled the "order of Melchizedek"? And does he mean to suggest that the *messiah* is actually a member of that order? It is highly unlikely that that is what David means. David is creatively inventing this "order of Melchizedek." It does not actually exist anywhere. It never has existed and it never will. Not even Jesus is actually a member of such an order. It is a poetic description of an actual reality. But it is not literally an actual reality itself.

from that same person *as a poetic symbol*. To illustrate these distinctions, consider the example of Johnny Appleseed.¹⁰

My only knowledge of Johnny Appleseed is as a legendary figure who lived in colonial America. The Johnny Appleseed of legend was a quirky, Tom-Bombadil-like figure who traversed the American frontier planting apple trees everywhere he went. My knowledge of him is limited to the folk legend that has been passed down. I know virtually nothing of the actual, historical Johnny Appleseed. I know nothing of his parentage, his ethnic background, his education, his motives, or his project. That is, I actually know almost nothing about him. I have only a very fanciful image of a legend.

Notice then, the distinction that we could draw between Johnny Appleseed as he existed in actuality from Johnny Appleseed as he continues to exist in the narrative account of him. They are not the same Johnny Appleseed. The former has a father and a mother; the latter does not. The former is an ordinary human being; the latter is an almost magical person. The former was born and died; the latter is, for all intents and purposes, eternal—he had no origin that we know anything about and he had no demise that we know anything about. Let us make this important distinction by way of these labels: *THE JOHNNY APPLESEED OF ACTUAL HISTORY* must be distinguished from *THE JOHNNY APPLESEED OF THE SURVIVING NARRATIVE*.

Now suppose that I was a person who was deeply committed to the preservation of nature—specifically, to the well being of the natural flora and fauna of the earth. Suppose, also, that I was deeply opposed to government and the state. I simply did not trust government and, as a matter of principle, I did not believe that it was the state's role to micro-manage the lives of free individuals. Out of these two impulses, I create an organization. The goal of the organization is to engage in projects that promote the well being of God's manifold flora and fauna in nature. However, it is decidedly not the goal of my organization to lobby the government. It is antithetical to the goal of my organization to seek any governmental solutions to any threats to the environment. My organization is to be an organization of people committed to spontaneously, voluntarily, and freely taking care of the environment. It is most emphatically not a political organization. As a matter of principle, the organization would prefer that the government stay out of the way and leave it to the passion and spontaneity of individual nature-lovers to take care of the environment. I decide on a name for my organization: *The Johnny Appleseed Society*.

Why Johnny Appleseed? And, more importantly, which Johnny Appleseed am I referencing in my title—the Johnny Appleseed of actual history, or the Johnny Appleseed of the surviving narrative? In my perception—based on the only surviving narrative I have of him—Johnny Appleseed is Tom-Bobadil-esque: innocent, unsophisticated, spontaneous, uncalculating, and oblivious to politics and the ways of human society. He

¹⁰ My example here is strictly hypothetical.

has a direct and personal relationship to nature, not an indirect and political one. It is this very image of Johnny Appleseed that made him seem an apt symbol for the organization I wanted to create. And it is precisely his direct and apolitical relationship to nature that recommended him to me as the symbol of my organization.

Notice, therefore, that the Johnny Appleseed that I reference in the title to my organization is most decidedly not the Johnny Appleseed of actual history. It is unmistakably the Johnny Appleseed of the surviving narrative. Notice further that *the historical accuracy of my reference is unimportant*. What if a historian were to successfully dig up the actual facts about Johnny Appleseed? And what if he were to discover that, in addition to planting trees everywhere he went, Johnny Appleseed was constantly petitioning the colonial authorities to pass laws make it unlawful to damage any apple trees? Would that historical discovery change the value of Johnny Appleseed as a poetic symbol of my organization? No, it would not. So long as the surviving narrative (the legend) remained unaffected by the new discovery, Johnny Appleseed would remain an effective symbol of my organization. The historical research would only put in stark contrast the difference between the Johnny Appleseed of actual history and the Johnny Appleseed of the surviving narrative. But since the poetic, metaphorical symbol of my organization is based on the person of the surviving narrative and not on the actual historical person, my poetic symbol remains valid and useful no matter how much the facts of history may tell a different, and conflicting, story.

How can that be? Because the point I want his image to communicate about my organization is independent of the true facts about Johnny Appleseed. The organization is what it is and stands for what it does on my authority as its founder. It is not answerable to the truth about its namesake, Johnny Appleseed. As the organization's founder, I *invented* the connection between the name Johnny Appleseed and the nature of my organization. I had the authority to do that. And no historical fact can alter what I meant when I created the connection; for the connection I made was between my organization and the Johnny Appleseed of the surviving narrative. It was not between my organization and the Johnny Appleseed of actual history.

Let us make this further important distinction by way of these labels: *JOHNNY APPLESEED AS HE EXISTED IN AND OF HIMSELF* MUST be distinguished from *JOHNNY APPLESEED AS A POETIC SYMBOL*. The title of my hypothetical organization utilizes Johnny Appleseed as a poetic symbol; it does not refer to Johnny Appleseed as he existed in and of himself.

PAUL'S TASK IN *HEBREWS 7*

We are finally in a position to understand what Paul is doing in *Hebrews 7*. Paul understands that the poet-prophet David, in composing Psalm 110, has made the Melchizedek of the surviving narrative the basis upon which to utilize him and transform him into a poetic symbol. Paul understands that David is not referring to Melchizedek as he existed in and of himself; he is referring to the Melchizedek that he has constructed to

be a poetic symbol. And Paul understands that David's adoption of Melchizedek as a poetic symbol of the priestly role of the *messiah* is not an adoption of the Melchizedek of *actual history* as the basis for that poetic symbol, rather it is an adoption of the Melchizedek of *the surviving narrative* as the basis for that poetic symbol. What is Paul doing, then, when we find him, in *Hebrews 7*, rummaging around Genesis 14 looking for facts about Melchizedek? He is not interpreting Genesis 14 to be suggesting a meaningful connection between the *messiah* and the actual historical Melchizedek. He is not seeking to discover actual, literal connections between Melchizedek and *Messiah* Jesus. Quite the contrary. He is seeking to discover in the surviving narrative about Melchizedek what it is that David must have seen that led him to adopt this Melchizedek of the surviving narrative as his poetic symbol for the priestly role of the *messiah*.

This may be plausible enough, but how can we be confident that this is actually how Paul is looking at Psalm 110 and Genesis 14? To demonstrate that this is what Paul is doing, consider just one element of *Hebrews 7*. In his discussion in *Hebrews 7*, Paul highlights the fact that Melchizedek's title and role as "King of Salem" can be translated "King of Peace (Shalom)." Why would Paul think that the translation of "Salem" is relevant?

If a person seeks to understand the event described in Genesis 14 as a historical event, would it matter what Melchizedek's city is named? What if he had been the king of Portland? Or Seattle? Or, Aumsville? What if the city-state of which he was king had been named "Meribah" (which translated means "Contention") rather than "Salem"? Would any aspect of the meaning and significance of the historical event be altered if the city had not been named Salem? It is difficult to see how. He is still a priest to the Most High God. He still meets Abraham and blesses him. Abraham still pays tithes to him. Nothing substantive within the event changes. And, yet, the translation of the city's name is something that Paul specifically highlights.

The fact that Paul highlights the translation of the city's name is clear evidence that he is not seeking to understand the meaning and significance of the historical event *per se*. Rather, he is exploring elements of the narrative itself, seeking to discover possible connections that might have led David to adopt Melchizedek as a metaphor and poetic symbol. He is not looking for real connections between the actual historical event itself and the coming *messiah*. If Paul thought that David was basing his poetic symbol on the actual, historical person of Melchizedek, he could not reasonably have thought that the translation of the city's name was relevant. But if Paul thought that part of the imaginative connection David was drawing between the nature and role of the *messiah* and the Melchizedek of the surviving narrative was the fact that both are kings of peace (Shalom), then it makes all the sense in the world that Paul would highlight the translation of the city's name. Jesus, of course, is the king of peace (shalom) in actuality. Melchizedek is the king of peace (shalom) only nominally. But, that difference is not material if the latter is only a poetic symbol of the former. Certainly the nominal king of peace (shalom) can serve as a poetic symbol of the actual king of peace (shalom).

Granted, Melchizedek is only the king of peace (shalom) as an accident of history and geography. But for the purposes of David, the poet, the connection is significant and valid. Melchizedek can serve as a poetic representation of the role and significance of Jesus, the *messiah*, because his nominal title is suggestive of the actual role and meaning of Jesus' eternal destiny. Poetically, therefore, the former can be used to point to the latter.

We can see then—in light of this one example—that the most likely and reasonable way to understand what Paul is doing in *Hebrews 7* is that he is seeking to understand what imaginative connections between the *messiah* and the Melchizedek of the surviving narrative led David to adopt the latter as a poetic symbol of the former. In other words, in *Hebrews 7*, Paul is not seeking to understand Genesis 14; he is seeking to understand the intention of David in Psalm 110.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF PAUL'S TASK IN *HEBREWS 7*

If this is the right way to understand *Hebrews 7*, this has several important implications. I outline five of them here:

(1) The connection between the *messiah* and Melchizedek is not a real metaphysical connection. It is a poetic creation. It is a metaphorical connection *created* by David; it is not a metaphysical connection *discovered* by David. David is not basing his claim that the *Messiah* will be a priest forever according to order of Melchizedek (in Psalm 110) on an inference from Genesis 14 (the historical event). He is making this claim on some other grounds. (He knows who the *messiah* will be by reflecting on the prophecy delivered to him by Nathan and on other revelations that he might have received from God.) Therefore, Paul is not re-discovering the fact that Genesis 14 foreshadows the priestly role of the *messiah*. So neither will the modern interpreter be able to see that Genesis 14 foreshadows or predicts the role of the *messiah*. We know that the *messiah* has a priestly role on the authority of the "prophet" David, in Psalm 110, not on the authority of Genesis 14.

(2) The claim that the *messiah* is "a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek" does not require that the "order of Melchizedek" actually exist in metaphysical reality as a viable order of priests. No actual, existing persons need ever belong to the "order of Melchizedek"—not even Jesus. The "order of Melchizedek" is a metaphor; it has only metaphorical existence. It has no metaphysical existence. It is a way of describing the role of the *messiah*; it is not asserting the existence of some actual priestly order.

(3) The list of "facts" outlined by Paul in *Hebrews 7* does not have to be literally true and historically accurate in order to be an accurate account of what Psalm 110 means. Since David's metaphor is based on the surviving narrative and not on the historical person himself, the "facts" that are relevant to discovering the meaning of David's symbol are to be found in the narrative, not in the historical reality. So, if *the narrative* portrays Melchizedek as "without father, without mother, without genealogy,"

then such a fact becomes available to David as an element that he could exploit in making Melchizedek a poetic symbol of the *messiah*. It makes no difference that the Melchizedek who existed in actual history undoubtedly DID have a father, a mother, and a genealogy. What is relevant to David's adopting him as a symbol is how he is portrayed in the narrative, not what was actually historically true about him.

(4) The Melchizedek of actual history is not a priest that belongs to an order of priesthood that is superior to the Levitical priesthood. The Melchizedek of actual history is a heathen priest of a polytheistic religion practiced by the Jebusites (Canaanites). In all probability, he is not a priest of superior status to that of the Levitical priests under the Mosaic Covenant. The nature of Melchizedek's priesthood would have no significance whatsoever (beyond what is explicitly stated or directly implied by what transpires in the Genesis account) if David had not transformed Melchizedek and his priestly role into a poetic, metaphorical symbol of the priestly role that God had predestined for the coming *messiah*.

(5) The Melchizedek who went out to meet Abraham and bless him in the event described in Genesis 14 need not be anything other than a normal, ordinary human being. There is nothing in Genesis 14, nothing in Psalm 110, and nothing in *Hebrews 7* that suggests otherwise. Melchizedek is most definitely not understood by either David or Paul to be a divine, eternal being. Accordingly, they do not understand Melchizedek to be a Christophany.

Hebrews 7 and the Pre-existence of Christ

As we saw above, if one wants to embrace Transcendent Monotheism as an alternative to Orthodox Trinitarianism with biblical integrity and intellectual consistency, then he must demonstrate that the best interpretation of *Hebrews 7* does not entail that Melchizedek is a Christophany. I have done that. I have shown that, under the most plausible reading of *Hebrews 7*, neither David (in Psalm 110) nor Paul (in *Hebrews 7*) are understanding Melchizedek as he existed in and of himself in history to be a Christophany, a manifestation to Abraham of the pre-existent second person of the triune godhead. Rather, the Melchizedek who is in view in *Hebrews 7* is the Melchizedek created by David to be a poetic symbol of the *messiah's* priestly function—a symbol that is based on the surviving narrative about him.

This conclusion does not disprove the doctrine of the Trinity. Neither does it disprove the traditional, orthodox doctrine of the incarnation. Indeed, it does not PROVE anything. But it does eliminate *Hebrews 7* as a decisive refutation of the Transcendent Montheist's understanding of the incarnation. There is nothing about Paul's discussion in *Hebrews 7* that is in conflict with the view that the *messiah*, the Son of God, first came into existence when he was born of the virgin Mary. The child born in Bethlehem was destined, from before the creation of the world, to be the one sent from God to reign as God's *messiah* and, in that capacity, to function as a priest, according to the order of

Melchizedek. He did not exist before his birth in any way other than in the promises and purposes of God. But in no way does that diminish his importance. In the ultimate purposes of God, there is no more important person in all of reality than the *messiah*, the Son of God, the one destined to serve as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Melchizedek as Christophany: A Re-examination

We have accomplished what we set out to accomplish in this paper. But one thing remains. If my argument is to be convincing, I need to revisit the five elements within the argument of *Hebrews 7* that have led bible students to conclude that Melchizedek is a Christophany and explain how those factors do not, in fact, have any such implications.

Reconsideration of First Assertion

In *Hebrews 7:3*, Paul says of Melchizedek that he is “without father, without mother, without genealogy.” What does Paul mean by that claim? To answer that, we need to understand what Paul thought David was thinking when he described the coming *messiah* as a priest according to the likeness of Melchizedek. Was David looking at the surviving narrative about Melchizedek, noticing that no genealogy of Melchizedek existed in that narrative, and then using this lack of any genealogy as a metaphor or symbol of the eternity of the *messiah*? That is logically possible. But I don’t think it is likely; for the absence of a genealogy is not a striking and dramatic element of the narrative. The reader of Genesis is not likely to read the story of Genesis and respond, “Wow! Look at that. Melchizedek does not have a father or mother.” The typical reader will assume that Melchizedek *does have* a father and mother. He simply realizes that he has not been given any information about who they are. But if one is not struck by the lack of any information about his genealogy—if it does not stand out—then how will its absence be usable as a meaningful metaphor? Since it is not plausible to think that Melchizedek as fatherless and motherless, he cannot very effectively serve as a symbol or metaphor of a transcendent and eternal being. Surely this is not how Paul is construing Melchizedek.

So what is Paul saying then? The thing that would most likely strike David about the Melchizedek of the Genesis narrative is that, whoever his parents are, they are not parents that would qualify him for service as a priest under the terms of the Mosaic Covenant. It is that striking fact that has suggested to David a connection with the *messiah*. The *messiah* is going to function as the ultimate and real priest, even though nothing in his genealogy would qualify him to serve as a priest under the terms of the Mosaic Covenant. The *messiah* was to be an extra-Covenantal priest just as Melchizedek was an extra-Covenantal priest. Clearly this must be one of the important senses in which the *messiah*’s priesthood will be like Melchizedek’s priesthood. This must, therefore, be part of what David is suggesting when he describes the *messiah* as a priest “according to the order of Melchizedek.” In any event, this is how Paul understands David’s intent in Psalm 110. And that is what he is pointing to by this statement here in *Hebrews 7*. His

statement in *Hebrews 7:3*, therefore, could be paraphrased this way: "With no father to qualify him to be a priest under the Law, with no mother to qualify him to be a priest under the Law, with no genealogy whatsoever to qualify him to be a priest under the Law, ... he remains a priest perpetually."¹¹

One might object that, if this were Paul's point, he would have stopped with the observation that he had no father to qualify him to be a priest under the Law. A mother could not have qualified him to be a priest under the Law without the appropriate father. So, if this were truly Paul's point, why would he include the point that he "had no mother"? Does his inclusion of the point that he "had no mother" not then support the point that Melchizedek was not an ordinary human being who came into existence from human parents? It could, of course. But it is more likely that Paul says he had no mother in order to make his point as emphatic as possible. This can be seen by his including the phrase, "without genealogy." Why would Paul add "without genealogy" if he has already said that he is "without father, without mother"? Is it not obvious that a person who is "without father, without mother" is "without genealogy"? So why does he include it? It seems apparent that it is way to emphasize—through REPETITION—Melchizedek's lack of qualifications to be priest. Melchizedek was not just lacking qualifications to serve as priest under the Law. He was *absolutely* lacking any qualifications to serve as priest, *no matter from what angle you looked at it*.

Several other points help corroborate the fact that this is Paul's point in *Hebrews 7:3*. Note these several points that emerge in Paul's ensuing argument:

- (i) In *Hebrews 7:6*, Paul says "But the one whose genealogy is not traced from them collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed the one who had the promises." Note how Paul explicitly highlights the fact that the priest, Melchizedek, who collected tithes from Abraham, did not have a "genealogy" that could be "traced from them (referring to the descendents of Abraham)." In other words, since he was not even descended from Abraham, he certainly could not have been qualified by the Law to receive tithes from the other descendents of Abraham. The issue there, clearly, is his lack of qualifications under the Law to function as a priest.
- (ii) Paul's explicit point in *Hebrews 7:11–17* is that Psalm 110 describes the *messiah* as being destined to serve as a priest who—because he is of the order of Melchizedek—is clearly not functioning on the authority of the Mosaic Covenant. He is not a priest "according to the order of Aaron." (*Hebrews 7:11*) He is not a priest who is qualified by and who serves under the terms of the Law of Moses. Paul further insists that the *messiah*'s role as a priest necessitates a "change of law." (*Hebrews 7:12*) Since a *messiah*-priest according to the order of

¹¹ In this regard, there is no difference between David basing his poetic metaphor on the historical Melchizedek or the Melchizedek that occurs in the surviving narrative. The relevant feature of both of them would be the lack of any parentage that would qualify him to be a priest in Israel.

Melchizedek would not be qualified to serve under the terms of the Mosaic Covenant, then it follows that he must be going to serve under the terms of a new and different Covenant.

- (iii) Toward the end of his discussion, Paul points out a clear implication of Psalm 110—the coming *messiah* will not be qualified to serve as priest on the basis of his genealogy, that is, he will serve as priest “not on the basis of a law of physical requirement (that is, not on the basis of being genealogically qualified).” How could he be? For he will be a priest according to Melchizedek, not according to Aaron. So, one will not consult his genealogy to determine whether he is qualified to function as the ultimate and true high priest. Rather, one will know that he is qualified to function as the ultimate and true priest in the presence of God by virtue of the fact that he is immortal. That is, he will be qualified to serve as priest “according to the power of an indestructible life.” In spite of his lack of genealogical qualifications, he nonetheless will be known to be qualified by his having overcome death. For the Psalm says, “You are a priest FOREVER.” (Hebrew 7:16–17)

Reconsideration of Second Assertion

In *Hebrews* 7:3, Paul says of Melchizedek that he has “neither beginning of days, nor end of life.” How could it be said of a Jebusite priest-king that he has “neither beginning of days, nor end of life”? Most certainly it could not. So how are we to understand Paul’s point here? We can understand what he means by way of an argument analogous to the argument just above. Any way you look at it, it makes no sense for Paul to be suggesting that Melchizedek is an eternal person. Certainly the historical Melchizedek who met Abraham was not an eternal being. He was an ordinary, mortal human being. Similarly, it makes no sense to understand Melchizedek from the surviving narrative about him that he is as a person without beginning or end. Would one read the Genesis 14 account concerning Melchizedek and think, “Wow! I don’t think this guy is mortal. He didn’t die. Neither was he ever born.” I don’t think so. The typical reader would just assume that he was born; and, equally, that he died. So what is Paul suggesting? What makes the most sense is that Paul is suggesting that the narrative about Melchizedek records neither the origin of his days AS PRIEST, nor does it describe the end of his life AS PRIEST. In other words, so far as the surviving narrative of Melchizedek is concerned, his role and authority to serve as priest is an unexplained fact, a given. We are not given an account of where his priestly authority originated, nor what gave legitimacy to it. Neither are we given an account of its demise, of how and when it ever lost its legitimacy. So, so far as the narrative is concerned, the priestly role within which Melchizedek functioned is timeless; it is eternal. Here, Paul suggests, is a feature of the Genesis narrative that serves as a basis for David’s poetic metaphor. The *messiah* is going to serve in a priestly role that is eternal. It is a role that was destined to be part of created reality before the world was even created. It is an eternal role. This, then, must surely be part of what David intended to communicate by saying that the *messiah* would

be a priest "according to the order of Melchizedek." David is trying to capture the truth that the *messiah* would serve a priestly role that was destined to be filled from before the creation of the world. Just as the priesthood of Melchizedek has no beginning or end within the narrative of Genesis, the priesthood of Jesus has no beginning nor end within the actuality of cosmic history.¹²

Furthermore, I believe this is the sense in which Paul's assertion in 7:8 is to be understood: "of whom it is witnessed that he lives on." Paul's argument seems to be that the worshipper is, in some sense, inferior to the priest to whom he pays tithes. Therefore, under the Mosaic Covenant, mortal Levitical priests are greater, in a sense, than their brother Israelites who pay tithes to them. But Abraham, the father of every Israelite and the father of every Levitical priest, paid tithes to Melchizedek. Is Melchizedek not, therefore, in some sense superior to every Israelite, including every Levitical priest? And what role is this Melchizedek filling? Whatever it is, it is witnessed BY THE NARRATIVE THAT TELLS HIS STORY, that it "lives on." In other words, nothing in the narrative of Melchizedek gives any indication that the role he was functioning in as priest ever comes to an end. As Paul puts it, "it is witnessed [by the narrative] that he lives on." Paul is not intimating that Melchizedek is immortal and eternal in the nature of his being. Rather, Paul is suggesting that Melchizedek is available to David as the symbol of an eternal priesthood, for nothing in the narrative of Melchizedek explicitly explains the origin or demise of his priesthood. So far as the narrative is concerned, the priesthood of Melchizedek is timeless.

Reconsideration of Third Assertion

We have already said enough to respond to the third element that leads to the interpretation of Melchizedek as a Christophany. First, when Paul says in 7:3, "being made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually," Paul is making the same point that we have just discussed above. Melchizedek "remains a priest perpetually" in the sense that (and only in the sense that), so far as the narrative account of Melchizedek is concerned, he functions in a priesthood that is timeless. But, when Paul begins his assertion with, "being made like the Son of God," what does he mean there? The Christophanic interpretation takes this to mean that the historical personage of Melchizedek was created to be in the likeness of the Son of God, the eternal second person of the Trinity. In other words, it takes it to mean that Melchizedek was specifically "created" to be a representation of the Christ. But, as we can see, that is not at all what Paul means. In *Hebrews* 7, Paul is seeking to understand the mind of David in Psalm 110. Therefore, when he writes with regard to Melchizedek, "being made like the

¹² Notice that, in this regard, Paul clearly thinks that David's poetic symbol is based on the Melchizedek of the surviving narrative and not on Melchizedek as he exists in his own right in actual history. The priesthood of the former is without beginning or end. Clearly, the priesthood of the latter *does* have a beginning and *does* have an end.

Son of God,” he is describing what he takes David to be doing, not what God did. In Psalm 110, David is transforming Melchizedek (insofar as he is known in the surviving narrative of Genesis 14) into a symbol (“likeness”) of the Son of God in his role as a priest. In that regard Paul is commenting on how David is “reading” the account about Melchizedek as the basis for his poetic image. David, in order to make him analogous to the Son of God, is construing the account of Melchizedek to portray a perpetual, timeless priesthood. (See point just above.) We could paraphrase Paul’s statement like this: “insofar as Melchizedek is construed (“made”) by David to convey something that reflects a likeness to the Son of God, Melchizedek is being construed to remain a priest perpetually.”

Reconsideration of Fourth Assertion

Does the fact that Paul argues that Melchizedek is greater than Abraham (and the Levitical priests descended from him) require that Melchizedek be the eternal second person of the Trinity? It does not. We have to think more carefully about what Paul is arguing. To begin, consider the Genesis account. Why did Abraham think it appropriate to pay tithes to Melchizedek? To answer this, I need to supply some background.

The text of Genesis never suggests that Abraham fully embraced transcendent monotheism in the form that YHWH revealed it to Moses. While Abraham came to fully entrust his life and existence to YHWH (under the name *’el ’elyon* and/or *’el shaddai*), we have no evidence that he ever came to understand YHWH to be the one and only transcendent author of all reality—as Moses came to understand God to be. So, Abraham may very well think of YHWH as the most powerful god in the pantheon of gods. Granted, this would be a weakness in his worldview; but there is no reason to think that Abraham did not suffer under this weakness. It is entirely possible, therefore, that—knowing Melchizedek to be a priest to God Most High (that is, to the god who is the most powerful god in the pantheon of gods)—Abraham would have accepted that Melchizedek was a priest to the god that he (Abraham) served. That is, he would have accepted that Melchizedek was a priest to the god that eventually identified himself as YHWH. To the extent (and only to the extent) that Melchizedek functions as an intermediary between Abraham and his god (YHWH), to that extent—and in that sense—Melchizedek is “greater than” Abraham. (It is critical to note that this is true even if Melchizedek is exactly what he seems to be—a Jebusite priest-king.) Paul’s argument in *Hebrews 7* is simply this: Due to the fact that Abraham had assumed an inferior status to a priest of God long before there even was a priesthood in Israel, there was a priesthood that functioned in Abraham’s life that, in a sense, had priority over the Levitical priesthood. To be specific, this was true of the priesthood that Melchizedek, the Jebusite, served. So, it does not imply that Melchizedek is anything more than an ordinary human being. Paul’s point in *Hebrews 7* is to identify one more element in the story of Melchizedek that David used as a point of analogy between Melchizedek and the *messiah*. Just as Melchizedek’s priesthood is greater, in a sense, than the Levitical priesthood, so will the coming *messiah*’s priestly role be greater and more important than that of the Levitical

priests. This, Paul argues, is part of what David means to convey by describing the *messiah*-king as "a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." Part of what he means is to say that the priestly role of the *messiah* will be of greater import and significance than that of the priests serving under the Mosaic Law. Nothing in Paul's point requires that Melchizedek's priesthood be as great as that of the *messiah*. All that Paul is noting is that Melchizedek's priesthood is, in some sense, arguably greater than (in the sense of being prior to) the Levitical priesthood. But that point does not indicate that Melchizedek's priesthood is the ultimate priesthood, the same priesthood as that which *Messiah* Jesus serves. Quite the contrary, the Melchizedekan priesthood is decidedly inferior to that of the *messiah*. The only thing that Paul's argument requires is that the Melchizedekan priesthood be prior to Abraham and his descendents. Nothing in his argument requires that it rise to the same level as the ultimate and true priesthood of Jesus himself. Consequently, it is simply false to argue that the only way the priesthood of Melchizedek can be said to be greater than Abraham is if he is the eternal second person of the Trinity. Clearly that is not so. Paul is not suggesting that Melchizedek was one and the same as the ultimate high priest. Only Jesus will ever fill that role.

Reconsideration of Fifth Assertion

Finally, in *Hebrews* 7:15-16, Paul makes this assertion concerning Jesus, "And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become *such* not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life." We have already discussed aspects of this statement above. The part that remains to be discussed is the phrase, "the power of an indestructible life." On what basis does Paul attribute such a trait to the *messiah*? He attributes immortality to the *messiah* on the basis of the prophet David's statement in his poem in Psalm 110, "you are a priest FOREVER, according to the order of Melchizedek." David, in his prophetic role, declared that the *messiah* would be an immortal being. He was to be a priest FOREVER. So, when in *Hebrews* 7:16 he refers to "another priest" arising who has become such, not because he is physically qualified under the terms of the Mosaic Covenant, but, rather, because he is qualified "according to the power of an indestructible life," three things need to be noted: (i) Paul is not talking about Melchizedek being qualified for his priesthood on the basis of his having an indestructible life; he is talking about Jesus being qualified for his priesthood on the basis of his having an indestructible life; (ii) Jesus is not a priest "according to the likeness of Melchizedek" because Melchizedek shares immortality with Jesus; and (iii) the similarity between Jesus' priesthood and Melchizedek's priesthood is that while Jesus and his priesthood are literally and actually immortal, Melchizedek's priesthood can be construed metaphorically as a symbol of an immortal priesthood by virtue of the fact that, so far as the surviving narrative is concerned, it has neither an origin nor a demise. Paul is not constructing the following argument: Melchizedek occupied an eternal priesthood; Jesus' priesthood is identical to Melchizedek's priesthood; therefore Jesus' priesthood is an eternal priesthood. Rather, Paul's argument is this: David prophesied that the *messiah*

who was to come would serve as a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek. (Now part of what David meant to convey by adopting Melchizedek as the symbol of the messianic priesthood was the timeless nature of that messianic priesthood that he symbolically represented.) The one who is qualified in God's eyes to serve as this priest according to the order of Melchizedek, therefore, will be the one to whom God has granted an indestructible life. Implicitly, this is an argument that Jesus is the one who is qualified for this role. For Jesus, having been raised from the dead, has clearly been granted an indestructible life. So, in brief, the one who possesses an indestructible life is Jesus, not Melchizedek. Since this description does not even apply to Melchizedek, it does not therefore prove (or even suggest) that Melchizedek is a Christophany.

Summary and Conclusion

A casual reading of *Hebrews 7* can suggest that Paul takes Melchizedek to be a Christophany. But a reasonable reading of Genesis 14 suggests that Melchizedek is a Jebusite priest-king, and not a Christophany at all. In fact, nothing in Genesis 14 would ever lead one to think that Melchizedek is a Christophany. So, *Hebrews 7* confronts the bible student with a serious problem. Has Paul made a terrible blunder in his interpretation of Genesis 14? Or, is Paul aware of valid interpretive methods that the average person is not? Or, does Paul perhaps have inspired knowledge of Melchizedek that none of the rest of us have? None of these options ultimately makes any sense. Instead, we are wrong to adopt the Melchizedek-as-Christophany interpretation of *Hebrews 7* in the first place.

We demonstrated this by showing that *Hebrews 7* is an interpretation of Psalm 110, not an interpretation of Genesis 14. So, Paul is not suggesting that one can learn something about the *messiah* from Genesis 14. On the contrary, Paul is suggesting that we have explicit prophetic teaching with regard to the *messiah* in Psalm 110. David asserts in his poem that the *messiah* will be "a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." *Hebrews 7* is Paul's exegesis and analysis of the meaning of that particular prophecy in Psalm 110.

In his analysis of Psalm 110, Paul understands David to have transformed Melchizedek as he exists in the narrative about him into a poetic symbol of the eternal priesthood of the coming *messiah*. As Paul examines the Genesis 14 narrative, therefore, he is not exegeting Genesis 14. Rather, he is trying to reconstruct the creative imagination of the poet David. Specifically, he is seeking to discover what connections David intended when he adopted Melchizedek as his poetic symbol of the messianic priesthood?

For the purposes of this paper, this is the critical point: neither David nor Paul takes Melchizedek to be a Christophany. So far as both of them are concerned, Melchizedek is a Jebusite priest-king who met Abraham in order to bless him. So, when we have rightly understood Paul's argument in *Hebrews 7*, we need not believe that Melchizedek is a Christophany. And if Melchizedek is not a Christophany, then *Hebrews 7* has no bearing

on our understanding of the incarnation whatsoever. It neither supports Orthodox Trinitarianism nor refutes it. It neither supports Transcendent Monotheism or refutes it. So, we have fulfilled the purpose of this paper: we have demonstrated that Transcendent Monotheism and other comparable views of the incarnation are not refuted by the argument of *Hebrews 7*.