

THE PRESENTATION OF THE LORD IN THE TEMPLE THE MELCHIZEDEK PRIESTHOOD

February 2, 2012
Revision C

GOSPEL: Luke 2:22-40
EPISTLE: Hebrews 7:7-17

Today's Gospel lesson is used extensively in the West for the Sunday after Christmas. It is the next major event following the Nativity of the Lord. In the East, this event is celebrated on February 2 as one of the Twelve Major Feast Days in the Church Year in keeping with Old Testament instructions. The Presentation of the Lord took place on the 40th day after His birth (Leviticus 12:1-4), and the Orthodox Church celebrates this on the 40th day after Christmas.

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Old Testament Background: The First-Born

As part of the Scripture readings for Vespers prior to the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, Exodus 12:51-13:16; 22:29 is prescribed. This reading describes one of the Lord's commands to Israel just prior to the Exodus from Egypt. "Sanctify to Me every first-born, the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel, both of man and beast; it belongs to Me" (Exodus 13:2).

For clean animals (that is, clean according to Leviticus 11), the young animal was allowed to be with its mother for a seven-day period after its birth. On the eighth day, it was offered as a sacrifice to the Lord (Exodus 22:30). For those people living at great distances from Jerusalem, the firstborn of clean animals could be brought anytime during the first year after the eighth day. The command concerning the first-born only applied to male animals (Exodus 13:12).

Unclean animals were not offered as sacrifices; instead, they were redeemed with a lamb. Anyone not desiring to redeem his first-born male among unclean animals was obliged to break its neck (Exodus 13:13, 34:20) or sell it (Leviticus 27:27).

Among men, the first-born son was to be devoted to the Lord as a priest; however, later, the Lord chose the tribe of Levi instead of the first-born to serve as priests (Numbers 8:14-19). This instruction for the first-born to serve as a priest is another of the readings for Vespers. Even though the Levites replaced the first-born as priests, the first-born were still required to be redeemed. Each first-born male was thus circumcised on the eighth day and redeemed on the 40th day at the purification of his mother (Leviticus 12); this is another of the readings for Vespers. The Levites had been chosen in place of the first-born due to their response to Moses following the incident of the golden calf (Exodus 32:26-29). Regarding the genealogy of Jesus, He was both the first-born of Mary and a descendant of Levi and Aaron. For example, Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, was of the daughters of Aaron (Luke 1:5). For more details on the genealogy of Jesus, see the Sunday before Christmas: "The Genealogy of Christ."

Gospel Lesson: Luke 2:21-40

Cyril of Alexandria, preaching on this Feast Day, stated¹, "Today we have seen Him obedient to the Laws of Moses, or rather we have seen Him Who as God is the Legislator, subject to His own decrees. And the reason for this the most-wise Paul teaches us, saying,

"When we were babes we were enslaved under the elements of the world; but when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, to redeem them that were under the Law' (Galatians 4:3). Christ therefore ransomed from the curse of the Law those who being subject to it, had been unable to keep its enactments".

Thus Jesus, as Mary's first-born, was redeemed according to the Mosaic Law, and was circumcised on the 8th day. He was not Joseph's first-born, even though Joseph was His legal father. Joseph had four other sons by his first marriage (Matthew 13:55). For more details on the family tree of Jesus, see the Sunday before Christmas, "The Genealogy of Christ". The Mosaic Law defined a first-born male as the one who "opened the womb" (Luke 2:23, Exodus 13:2), and thus the "first born" was relative to the mother, not the father.

At the same time, He became the "redemption" for us. Since we are to God a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6, 1 Peter 2:5), we need to be redeemed and sanctified just as the Levitical priests and the first-born of man under the Old Covenant. Christ became the sacrificial lamb offered as the price of our redemption (John 1:29, 36).

It was customary also on the eighth day for the child to receive his name (Luke 2:21, 1:59-65). As instructed by the angel, Joseph gave his stepson the name Jesus (Hebrew: Yehoshua, or Joshua) meaning "The Lord is Salvation" (Luke 2:21, Matthew 1:18-25). By naming Him, Joseph accepted Jesus as his legal son.

Cyril of Alexandria commented² on Christ's circumcision as follows: His circumcision "contains the hidden revelation of the truth. For on the eighth day³ Christ rose from the dead, and gave us the spiritual circumcision. For He commanded the Holy

¹ Cyril of Alexandria, "Homily 3", Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 55.

² Cyril of Alexandria, "Homily 3", Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Studion Publishers, 1983, p. 57.

³ That is, the Sabbath was the 7th day of the week; on the day after the Sabbath (Matthew 28:1), Christ rose from the dead.

Apostles: ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’ (Matthew 28:19). And we agree that the spiritual circumcision takes place chiefly in the season of holy baptism, when also Christ makes us partakers of the Holy Spirit”.

“But after Christ’s circumcision the rite was done away with by the introduction of that which had been signified by it, namely baptism; for which reason we are no longer circumcised. For circumcision seems to me to have accomplished three ends: (1) It separated the posterity of Abraham by a sort of sign and seal, and distinguished them from all other nations. (2) It prefigured in itself the grace of Divine baptism. As in old time, he that was circumcised was reckoned among the people of God by that seal; so also he that is baptized, having formed in himself Christ the seal, is enrolled into God’s adopted family. And (3) it is the symbol of the faithful when established in grace, which cut away and deaden the rising of carnal pleasures and passions by the sharp surgery of faith, and by ascetic labors. Not cutting the body, but purifying the heart, and being circumcised in the spirit, not in the letter; whose praise, as Paul testifies (Romans 2:29), doesn’t need any human tribunal, but depends upon the decree from above”.

The Presentation

When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple on the 40th day, Zachariah was serving in the Temple that week according to tradition. This agrees with the Scriptural account according to the calendar. John the Baptist was six months older than Jesus (Luke 1:36) and John’s nativity is celebrated June 24. His conception nine months earlier is also celebrated as a Special Feast Day in the Orthodox Church, September 23. If Zachariah was serving as high priest of the 8th lot (1 Chronicles 24:10) in mid September, just before John’s conception, and if he served every 24th week (as the 8th lot would do), he would have served also (1) on March 1st before John’s birth, when he was mute (Luke 1:20-22), (2) in mid August after John’s birth and before Jesus was born and (3) on February 1st after Jesus was born when Joseph and Mary came to present Jesus. Tradition also mentions that Zachariah was temporarily retired from service during his muteness, but was then reinstated after he regained his voice at John’s circumcision (Luke 1:64).

Zachariah knew that Mary had been carrying the Messiah in her womb from her stay with Elizabeth for three months (Luke 1:36-40). In addition, he had inquired of the midwives who attended Mary and who testified that she remained a virgin after giving birth. Therefore, when Joseph and Mary came to present Jesus in the Temple, Zachariah had Mary stand in the place reserved for virgins where women with husbands had no right to stand. The Pharisees and some other priests objected, but Zachariah insisted that she was still a virgin even though she was carrying her Son. Thus, the Virgin Birth was proclaimed in the Temple.

The Jewish elders were so angry at Zachariah for this that they sought to have him killed and went to advise Herod, their despised arch enemy, on how to do this. During the massacre of the Holy Innocents, they got their chance. Zachariah wouldn’t disclose where John was hidden (Elizabeth took him to the wilderness) and Herod’s soldiers killed Zachariah right in front of the Temple. Later, the Lord laid this murder charge against them, also calling them sons of Cain

(Matthew 23:35).

Another of the readings at Vespers is Isaiah 6:1-12. In this reading, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on His Throne in the Temple. Seraphim stood above Him saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of His Glory”, while the Temple was filled with smoke. Isaiah thought he would die for having seen God and for having unclean lips, but an angel touched his mouth with a live coal from the altar and caused his sin to be forgiven (Isaiah 6:1-7).

Then the Lord asked, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” Isaiah volunteered! The Lord then told Isaiah, “Go tell this people: ‘keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand.’ Render the hearts of this people fat, their ears heavy and their eyes smeared, lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed” (Isaiah 6:8-10).

All this was a fitting description of the Jewish elders’ response to Zachariah, the high priest’s proclamation of the Virgin Birth. They had witnessed the miraculous birth of John in Elizabeth’s old age (Luke 1:5-7, 24-25); they had seen Zachariah become mute from a vision in the Temple concerning this (Luke 1:11-22); and they had witnessed Zachariah suddenly regain his voice at John’s circumcision (Luke 1:59-64) and begin to prophesy (Luke 1:67-79). This was a big enough event that “fear came on all who dwelt around them” (Luke 1:65). Yet they sought to kill Zachariah for proclaiming something they didn’t want to hear.

Simeon and Anna

Two people met Joseph, Mary and Jesus at the Presentation: Simeon and Anna. Simeon was a very old man, who was righteous and devout, and who looked for the consolation of Israel. It had been revealed to him that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah (Luke 2:25-26). According to traditional sources, Simeon was over 200 years old and had been a translator of the Septuagint (the Hebrew Old Testament translated into Greek). The Apostle Matthias was described as once a student of Simeon⁴; thus Matthias was one of the oldest of the Twelve Apostles.

Simeon took the infant Jesus in his arms and prophesied concerning the mystery which for ages had been hidden in God: that the Gentiles were to be fellow heirs and fellow members of the Body of Christ and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel (Ephesians 3:4-11, Colossians 1:26). With his Lord in his arms, he then asked his Lord to let him depart this life in peace after waiting so long to see his Salvation (Luke 2:29-30). Other sources add that Simeon’s eyes were opened, like Elisha’s servant’s eyes (2 Kings 6:15-17), and he saw angels, standing in a circle around Him, like bodyguards standing by their King. Simeon then blessed Joseph and Mary and prophesied again about the impact Jesus was to have and about “a sign that shall be spoken against”, which would later come to be the Cross (Luke 2:34-35, 1 Corinthians 1:18-23). One might wonder who was presenting whom. Was Simeon presenting Jesus in the Temple or was Jesus presenting Simeon to His Father (“let your servant depart in peace”) after a long and very fruitful life?

The elder Simeon also prophesied, saying to Mary, “This child is destined for the fall and

⁴ Nickolai Velimirovic, Prologue From Ochrid, Lazarica Press, Birmingham, 1986, August 9.

rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against; and a sword will pierce through your own soul also so as the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35). Cyril of Alexandria interprets⁵ Simeon’s words as follows: “The fall of many in Israel refers to the Jewish leaders being broken and scattered like chaff by the chief cornerstone. The sword piercing Mary’s soul (compare Zachariah 13:7) was “the pain which she suffered for Christ, in seeing Him Whom she brought forth crucified and not knowing at all that He would be stronger than death and rise again from the grave”.

Just as Simeon was saying this, the Prophetess Anna entered. She had lived for 84 years as a widow who did not leave the Temple, but served God with fasting and prayers day and night (Luke 2:36-38). If she was at least 15 when she married, and lived with her husband for 7 years before he died (Luke 2:36, 37), this would make her at least 106 years old. She spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Israel. Anna had undoubtedly known Mary during the 10+ years that Mary grew up in the Temple. The Temple area was not so big that someone could be overlooked for 10 years, especially someone who was known to have regular contact with angels as was the case with Mary.

⁵ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Luke, Homily 4, Chapter 2, Studion Publishers, 1983, pp. 61-62.

THE MELCHIZEDEK PRIESTHOOD

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Revision C

Epistle Lesson: Hebrews 7:7--17

Today's Epistle lesson is not used at all in the Western lectionaries.

Background: The Levitical Priesthood

Prior to Moses, the priests were the heads of families. For example, the Patriarchs served as a priest, performing priestly duties that were later limited to the Levites.

Abraham	Genesis 12:7, 13:18, 15:7-10, 17
Isaac	Genesis 26:25
Jacob	Genesis 33:20, 35:1-2, 35:14
Job	Job 1:4-5

When Israel was in Egypt, Joseph married the daughter of the priest of On (pronounced: "Own") and showed special favor to the Egyptian priests during the famine (Genesis 41:45, 50, 46:20, 47:26).

Moses was born of the tribe of Levi (Exodus 2:1-10) and was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians (Acts 7:22), which included priestly activities. Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, the priest of Midian. Midian was one of the sons of Abraham by Keturah (Genesis 25:1-4).

After the Exodus, the plan was for all the first-born in each household to serve the Lord as priests (Exodus 13:1-3, 11-16). The intended result was for Israel to be God's special treasure among all peoples of the earth and a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19:4-6). That intent hasn't changed and the church has become what God intended for Israel (1 Peter 5:9, Revelation 1:6, 5:10).

When Moses went up Mt. Sinai to receive the Law from God, the people built the Golden Calf, thinking Moses died in the smoke, thunder and lightning (Exodus 19:16-20, 32:1). When Moses returned to find idolatry and the people out of control (Exodus 32:25-26), Moses called for "whoever is for the Lord, come to me". Only the Levites responded. Therefore, the Lord chose the Levites as priests instead of the first-born of every family (Numbers 3:12-13, 41; 8:14-19).

By the 1st Century, the Sanhedrin was in charge of determining who was qualified to be a priest, and met daily regarding new candidates. Two principal issues were considered: Was the candidate of the tribe of Levi? And did he have any physical deformity? (Leviticus 21:17-23).

Regarding descent, all genealogical records were kept in the Temple, and so a careful search was possible. This was how the genealogies of Jesus were obtained as recorded in Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38. Jewish tradition had added deformity to the list given in Leviticus 21.

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The Melchizedek Priesthood

In contrast to the Levitical Priesthood, the Epistle lesson centers on the Melchizedek Priesthood. Much debate has been generated on the identity of Melchizedek.

Paul pointed out that the lesser, Abraham, is always blessed by the greater, Melchizedek (Hebrews 2:7). Could Melchizedek have been an angel? The giving of a tithe by Abraham was an acknowledgment by Abraham that Melchizedek's priesthood was of God, and Abraham seemed to recognize Melchizedek as someone greater than himself, since the tithe was customarily presented to Deity (Leviticus 27:30-32, Deuteronomy 26:12-15). While angels' appearance often resembles that of the Son of God, angels are not spoken of as priests but as messengers⁶ and as deacons⁷.

Ambrose stated⁸ that Melchizedek was not an angel, but was a holy man and a priest of God who prefigured Christ as a "type" or a shadow of the Truth. While angels' appearances often resemble that of the Son of God, angels are referred to as messengers and not as priests. Cyprian stated⁹,

"Melchizedek bore a type of Christ. He offered bread and wine and blessed Abraham. Who is more of a priest of the Most High God than our Lord Jesus Christ, Who offered Himself as a sacrifice to God the Father? He offered the very same thing that Melchizedek offered; that is, bread and wine, namely, His body and blood".

The person Melchizedek was tied intimately with the person of the Messiah in Old Testament prophecy and in 1st Century expectation. Referring to the messianic expectation, Jesus asked the Pharisees a question, "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose Son is He?" They answered, "The Son of David." Jesus replied, "How then does David in the Spirit call Him 'Lord', saying 'The Lord said to My Lord, sit at My Right Hand till I make Your enemies Your footstool' (Psalms 110:1)? If David then calls Him 'Lord', how is He his Son?" This was very embarrassing for them and no one dared question Jesus any more (Matthew 22:41-46). The answer is that Christ is the Son of God in His Person and the Son of David in His humanity.

Thus everyone agreed that Psalm 110 was addressing the Messiah. In this light, Psalm 110 also states, "The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind. Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Psalm 110:4). Paul quoted this verse in saying that Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of David in becoming High Priest according to the Order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:21). The prophet Zachariah also foretold that Messiah would be both a ruler (i.e. King) and a priest (Zachariah 6:12-13).

We get some illumination on who Melchizedek was (Hebrews 7:1-7). First, he is

⁶ The Hebrew word *malak* and the Greek word *aggelos* both can be translated either "messenger" or "angel" depending on the context.

⁷ The Greek word *diakonos* can be translated either "servant" or "deacon" depending on the context. Paul referred to angels as deacons (Hebrews 1:14).

⁸ Ambrose of Milan, *Of the Christian Faith*, III, xi, 87-89.

⁹ Cyprian of Carthage, *Epistles*, Lxii, 4.

described as having no genealogy (Hebrews 7:3). In the 1st Century, this was indisputable since one could go look it up in the Temple. Summarizing some characteristics of Melchizedek:

CHARACTERISTIC	REFERENCE
No genealogy	Hebrews 7:3, 6
Neither beginning of days or end of life	Hebrews 7:3, 8, 16
Made like the Son of God	Hebrews 7:3
Blessed the Patriarch Abraham	Hebrews 7:1, 6-7
Blessed Priest of the Most High God	Hebrews 7:1
Blessed God who saved Abraham	Genesis 14:19
Received a tithe from Abraham	Hebrews 7:2, 4-5, Genesis 14:19

Paul used the figure of Melchizedek to compare the Levitical priesthood to that of Christ. In doing so, he described Melchizedek as having no father and mother, no genealogy and neither beginning of days nor end of life (Hebrews 7:3,6,16). John Chrysostom stated¹⁰ that when Paul described Melchizedek in these terms, he was speaking in comparison to the Levitical priesthood, and he meant that information about Melchizedek’s parents, his birth and his death wasn’t available.

Records that were kept in the Temple in Jerusalem for determining the Levitical priests would not include Melchizedek if he were not a descendant of Shem. Similarly, genealogical records for Job, a descendant of Esau, were not kept in the Temple either. The point was that if Melchizedek was greater than Abraham and was a type of Christ, then Christ is far greater than Abraham, the priesthood of Christ is far greater than the Levitical priesthood, and genealogies are irrelevant.

No matter how one interprets the identity of Melchizedek, one can conclude that, as a minimum, the “Order of Melchizedek” takes on the meaning of a priestly function as it was originally intended at the Creation, and not as it was restricted and limited to the Levites at the time of Moses. Melchizedek first brought out bread and wine when Abraham returned from battle; then He blessed and received tithes from Abraham (Genesis 14:18-20). There was no victory parade, no feast, no raucous celebration; just bread and wine. Given the circumstances, this seems very unusual!

Melchizedek gave everyone a glimpse of things to come with the bread and wine. When the Son of God came in the Incarnation, He also brought bread and wine, blessed it, and said, “Take, eat, this is My Body” and “This is My Blood” (Matthew 26:26-29). Ignatius of Antioch referred¹¹ to the Lord’s Supper as “the medicine of immortality”. Yet it is a mystery as to how the bread and the wine is the Lord’s body and blood. He didn’t explain it to Abraham and He doesn’t explain it to us.

Thus it is fitting today when we consider the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, that we consider Who is being presented. His earthly parents are presenting our Great High Priest, of the Order of Melchizedek, the One for whom the Temple was built.

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XII, 3,

¹¹ Ignatius of Antioch, Epistle to the Ephesians, 19.

John Chrysostom stated¹² that Paul prepared the readers of Hebrews to understand the differences between the New and Old Covenants. There was something mystical about Melchizedek from his ability to remain a priest continually. Melchizedek was a man whose genealogical records were not kept in the Temple in Jerusalem because he was not a descendant of Shem. His unknown genealogy mystically represented Christ whose genealogy doesn't exist in His Deity. The greatness of Melchizedek is illustrated by his superiority to Abraham, the father of faith and the Friend of God.

“Paul wished to show the difference between the New and Old Covenant, and began by saying, ‘to them He spoke by prophets, but to us by the Son’ (Hebrews 1:1-2). Afterwards, he spoke about the Son, who He was and what He had done. Having said that He is ‘High Priest after the order of Melchizedek’ (Hebrews 6:20), and having taken much preparation, he introduced the discussion on the difference of the two dispensations to ears ready to listen. For he who is depressed is not a ready listener. To understand this, hear the Scripture saying, ‘They didn’t listen to Moses because of anguish of spirit’ (Exodus 6:9). Therefore having first cleared away their despondency by many considerations, some fearful, some more gentle, he then from this point entered on the discussion of the difference between the dispensations.”

“What is especially noteworthy is the great difference in the New versus Old Covenant from Melchizedek himself. ‘For this Melchizedek, King of Salem, Priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the Kings, and blessed him, to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all’ (Hebrews 7:1-2). Having concisely set down the whole account about Melchizedek, he looked at it mystically.”

“First from the name ‘King of righteousness’ (Hebrews 7:2): for *Melek* means ‘King’ and *Tsedeq* means ‘righteousness’. But who is ‘King of righteousness’, except our Lord Jesus Christ? And after that also ‘King of Salem’, from his city, that is, ‘King of Peace’, which again is characteristic of Christ. Christ has made us righteous, and has ‘made peace’ for ‘things in Heaven and things on earth’ (Colossians 1:20). What man is ‘King of Righteousness and King of Peace, except our Lord Jesus Christ?’”

“He adds another distinction, ‘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 continually’ (Hebrews 7:3). There was a possible objection in the words, ‘You are a Priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek’, since Melchizedek was dead, and was not Priest forever’. He explained it mystically. The meaning is that we do not know when or what father he had, or what mother, or when he received his beginning, or when he died. Just because we don’t know it, it doesn’t mean that he didn’t die, and had no parents. As Melchizedek is so from his genealogy not being given, so is Christ from the nature of the Incarnation.”

“In the case of Melchizedek, we don’t know either ‘beginning of days’, or ‘end of life’, because they have not been written down; we don’t know them in the case of Jesus because they do not exist. The names ‘King of Righteousness’ and ‘King of Peace’ are titles both with the type and with the reality. The Son

¹² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XII, 1-4.

is ‘without beginning’, not with respect to His not having a cause, for this is impossible; He has a Father, otherwise how is He Son? He is ‘without beginning’ with respect to His ‘not having beginning or end of life’”.

“Consider how great this man is to whom even the Patriarch Abraham gave the tenth of the spoils’ (Hebrews 7:4). Up to this point he has been applying the type; now he boldly shows Melchizedek to be more glorious than Jewish impressions of his day. But if he who bears a type of Christ is so much better not merely than the priests, but even than the forefather of the priests (that is Abraham), what should one say of the reality? Do you see how he shows the superiority? ‘Consider how great this man is to whom even the Patriarch Abraham gave a tenth out of the choice portions’. Spoils taken in battle are called ‘choice portions’. It cannot be said that Abraham gave them to Melchizedek because Melchizedek had a part in the war, because Melchizedek met Abraham ‘returning from the slaughter of the kings’ (Genesis 14:17-18). Melchizedek had stayed at home, yet Abraham gave him the first-fruits of his labors.”

Gregory Nazianzen emphasized¹³ that Christ is the Lamb that was offered, the High Priest, Melchizedek, who offered the lamb and was without mother in His Deity, without father in His humanity. In assuming humanity, He released us from condemnation that we may become a god as we sit with Him in heavenly places.

“Christ is called Man, that through His Body He may be seen and understood by embodied creatures, whereas otherwise this would be impossible because of His incomprehensible nature. But also that by Himself He may sanctify humanity, and be as it were a leaven to the whole lump (1 Corinthians 5:6). By uniting to Himself that which was condemned, He may release it from all condemnation, becoming for all men all things that we are, except sin; body, soul, mind and all through which death reaches. Thus He became Man, who is the combination of all these; God in visible form, because He retained that which is perceived by mind alone¹⁴. He is Son of Man, both on account of Adam, and of the Virgin from Whom He came; from the one as a forefather, from the other as His Mother, both in accordance with the Law of generation, and apart from it¹⁵. He is Christ, because of His Godhead. For this is the Anointing of His Manhood, and does not, as is the case with all other Anointed Ones, sanctify by its action, but by the Presence in His Fullness of the Anointing One. The effect is that which anoints, (i.e. Christ) is called Man, and that which is anointed (i.e. us) is called god. He is The Way, because He leads us through Himself; He is the Door, as letting us in; He is the Shepherd, as making us dwell in a place of green pastures (Psalm 23:2). He brings us up by waters of rest, and leads us there, protects us from wild beasts, converts the wandering, brings back that which was lost, binds up that which was broken, guards the strong, and brings them together in the Fold beyond, with words of pastoral knowledge. He is the Sheep, as the Victim; The Lamb, as being perfect; the High Priest, as the Offerer; Melchizedek, as without Mother in that Nature which is above us, and without Father in ours;

¹³ Gregory Nazianzen, 4th Theological Oration, XXX, 21.

¹⁴ That is, His Deity

¹⁵ That is, His conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary was apart from the Law of generation.

and without genealogy above. For ‘who’, it says, ‘shall declare His generation?’ (Isaiah 53:8) Moreover, as King of Salem, which means Peace, and King of Righteousness, He receives tithes from Patriarchs, when they prevail over powers of evil. They are the titles of the Son.”

Ambrose of Milan stated¹⁶ that Christ was the type of all future priests in taking our flesh. In His flesh, He learned obedience, even though He was the Son of God. Just like Aaron, He did not demand but received the priesthood. Unlike Aaron and his priesthood, which contained heirs of the family rather than sharers in righteousness, Christ’s priesthood contains holiness of character.

“He is the good Physician, Who has taken upon Him our infirmities, has healed our sicknesses, and yet He did not honor Himself to be made a High Priest, but He Who spoke to Him. The Father said, ‘You are My Son, this day have I begotten You’ (Hebrews 5:5, Psalm 2:7). As He said in another place, ‘You are a Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek’ (Hebrews 6:20). Since He was the type of all future priests, He took our flesh upon Him, that ‘in the days of His flesh He might offer prayers and supplications with a loud voice and tears. By those things which He suffered, though He was the Son of God, might seem to learn obedience, which He taught us, that He might be made to us the Author of Salvation’ (Hebrews 5:7-9 paraphrase). And at last when His sufferings were completed, as though completed and made perfect Himself, He gave health to all, He bore the sin of all.”

“He Himself also chose Aaron as priest, that not the will of man but the grace of God should have the chief part in the election of the priest (Numbers 16:40). It was not the voluntary offering of himself, nor the taking it upon himself, but the calling from heaven, that He should offer gifts for sins, that He could be touched for those who sinned, for He Himself bears our weakness (Hebrews 9:28, Galatians 6:2). No one ought to take this honor upon himself, but they are called of God, as was Aaron (Hebrews 5:4), and so Christ did not demand but received the priesthood.”

“The succession derived through family descent from Aaron (i.e. the Levitical priesthood), contained rather heirs of the family than sharers in his righteousness. There came, after the likeness of that Melchizedek, the true Melchizedek, the true King of peace, the true King of righteousness, for this is the interpretation of the Name. His genealogy, in His Divine Generation, had no mother, and was in His Birth of the Virgin Mary was without a father. He was begotten before the ages by the Father alone, born in this age of the Virgin alone, and certainly could have no beginning of days seeing He ‘was in the beginning’ (John 1:1). And how could He have any end of life, Who is the Author of life to all? He is ‘the Beginning and the Ending’ (Revelation 1:8). But this also is referred to Him as an example, that a priest ought to be without father and without mother, since in him it is not nobility of family, but holiness of character and pre-eminence in virtue which is elected.”

“Let there be in him faith and ripeness of character, not one without the other, but let both meet together in One with good works and deeds. For which reason the Apostle Paul wishes that we should be imitators of them, who, ‘by

¹⁶ Ambrose of Milan, Letters, Epistle LXIII, 47-50.

faith and patience' (Hebrews 6:12) possess the promises made to Abraham, who by patience was found worthy to receive and to possess the grace of the blessing promised to him. David the prophet warns us that we should be imitators of holy Aaron, and has set him among the Saints of God to be imitated by us, saying, 'Moses and Aaron among his priests, and Samuel among those that call upon His Name'" (Psalm 99:6).

A Changing of the Law

If the priesthood changed from the Levitical priesthood to the Melchizedek priesthood in the 1st Century, "of necessity there is also a change of the Law" (Hebrews 7:12). The Levitical priesthood had dealt with "a law of a fleshly commandment" (Hebrews 7:16), with many procedures¹⁷ dealing with the flesh. These procedures were weak and unprofitable (Hebrews 7:18) because they made nothing perfect (Hebrews 7:19). Paul pointed out (Romans 8:3) that it was not the Law itself that was weak, but we were weak because of our flesh.

With the change in the Law, the Law of God is written on our hearts, and it is within us (Jeremiah 31:33). Also within us is the Holy Spirit, Who teaches us to discern all things (1 Corinthians 2:10-16). For example, He teaches us that circumcision needs to be applied to the heart to be made perfect (Romans 2:29). Thus, the Law is not thrown out, it is just changed and refined (Matthew 5:18). Adultery applies not just to the fleshly act, but also to the thought (Matthew 5:27-28). Murder applies not just to killing the flesh, but also to hate (Matthew 5:21-24).

Our High Priest teaches us that, "The true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24). At the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, the changeover began. No wonder, at age 33, on the day after Palm Sunday, Jesus drove the moneychangers, etc., out of the Temple. Quoting Isaiah, He said, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations (Isaiah 56:7). But you have made it a den of thieves" (Mark 11:17). He had done this same thing three years earlier, just as He began His public ministry. In describing this, the Apostle John stated that the disciples then remembered that it was written (Psalm 69:9), "Zeal for Thy house has consumed Me" (John 2:13-17). One can think of this zeal beginning as Christ was presented in the Temple by His parents.

As a result of this, we now have a greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands; that is, not of this creation. For our High Priest entered the Most Holy Place once for all, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood. And through the eternal Spirit, He offered Himself, without spot, to God that He might cleanse our conscience from dead works to serve the Living God (Hebrews 9:11-14).

John Chrysostom interprets¹⁸ this imagery as follows: The more perfect tabernacle is His human body, where Paul refers to our human bodies as tabernacles also (2 Corinthians 5:1). The Most Holy Place where He entered to appear in the presence of God for us (Hebrews 9:24) is heaven, where heaven is veiled off from curious bystanders. His flesh also was a veil hiding the

¹⁷ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XIII, 3.

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XV, 4.

Godhead. In this imagery, Christ did not become a high priest; He came¹⁹ as the High Priest.

John Chrysostom stated²⁰ that Melchizedek was greatly superior to Abraham and Levi. If the Levitical priesthood came after the Melchizedek priesthood, one could argue that it was superior to and replaced the Melchizedek priesthood, but only according to the flesh. If the Levitical priesthood were superior, Christ would have assumed it. In Christ, the priesthood returns to its origin. That is, Melchizedek was a king, but Levi wasn't; Christ is also a King. Laws based on a carnal commandment, such as given to Moses, are temporary. The result of a changing priesthood is a changing Law, since the old Law made nobody perfect. What was really needed was the power of the Holy Spirit within us to motivate us to want to draw near to God.

“He had shown that Melchizedek was greatly superior both to Levi and to Abraham, being priests to them. If Christ had been ‘after the order of Melchizedek’ according to the flesh, and then afterwards the Law had been introduced, along with all that pertained to Aaron, one might reasonably say that the priesthood of Aaron was more perfect than the priesthood of Melchizedek, seeing that it had come in after it. But if Christ comes later, and takes the priesthood of Melchizedek, it is obvious that the priesthood of Aaron was imperfect. Let us suppose for argument’s sake, that all has been fulfilled, and that there is nothing imperfect in the priesthood of Aaron. What need was there that Christ should be called ‘after the order of Melchizedek and not after the order of Aaron’? Why did He set aside Aaron, and introduce a different priesthood, that of Melchizedek, if the perfection of the doctrines of life had been by the Levitical priesthood?”

“If there must be another priesthood, there must be also another Law (Hebrews 7:12). Paul could have given testimony from prophecy, such as, ‘This is the covenant which I made with your fathers’, etc. (Hebrews 8:10). But for the present he concentrates on the priesthood. If another priesthood has been introduced, there must be also another Covenant; for it is not possible that there should be a priest without a covenant, laws and ordinances, nor that having received a different priesthood He should use the former covenant.”

“The New Covenant was a change not only in its character and in its ordinances, but also in its tribe. “For the priesthood was changed from the priestly tribe to the royal tribe, that the same tribe might be both royal and priestly.”

“Observe the mystery. First it was royal, and then it became priestly; so therefore also with regard to Christ; for He always was King, but He has become Priest from the time that He assumed the Flesh, and offered the sacrifice.”

“Another difference comes from the type itself, ‘Who became a priest not according to the Law of a carnal commandment, but according to the power of an endless life’ (Hebrews 7:16). What is, ‘a carnal commandment’? Circumcise

¹⁹ That Christ’s High Priesthood extends to eternity past, Cyril of Jerusalem mentioned this in Catechetical Lectures, X, 13-15, XI, 1. Athanasius of Alexandria also implies this in Four Discourses Against the Arians, II, xv, 12. John Chrysostom stated it similarly, “Paul did not say that Christ came first and then became High Priest, but having come for this very purpose. He came and became at the same time.” John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XV, 4.

²⁰ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Hebrews, XIII, 1-4.

the flesh (Genesis 17:10-14); anoint the flesh (Exodus 28:41); wash the flesh (Numbers 19:7-10); purify the flesh (Numbers 19:9, Leviticus 14:9); shave the flesh (Leviticus 13:33, 14:8-9); bind on the flesh (Deuteronomy 6:8); cherish the flesh (Deuteronomy 13:6); rest as to the flesh (Exodus 31:14-15). Its blessings are: Long life for the flesh; milk and honey for the flesh; peace for the flesh; luxury for the flesh. From this Law Aaron received the priesthood; Melchizedek didn't receive it that way."

"By 'the Law of a carnal commandment', he implied temporary. Paul says this also in another place, 'carnal ordinances imposed until the time of reformation' (Hebrews 9:10). The contrast that is implied is that Christ operates by the law of a spiritual commandment. Christ lives 'According to the power of an endless life' (Hebrews 7:16), that is, because He lives by His own power."

"What does he mean, 'the Law made nothing perfect?' It made no man perfect, since it was always being disobeyed. Even if it had been listened to, it would not have made one perfect and virtuous. For written precepts were set down, 'Do this' and 'Do not do that', being commanded only, but no power was given within to accomplish it. Was the Law then of no use? It was indeed useful, and of great use; but to make men perfect it was useless. All were figures; all were shadows; circumcision, sacrifice, Sabbath. They could not reach through to the soul, therefore they pass away and gradually withdraw. But the bringing in of a better hope did reach through to the soul, and by this we draw near²¹ to God."

Ambrose of Milan stated²² that the Eucharistic Feast was introduced by Melchizedek over 400 years before Moses and is therefore more ancient than the sacred rites of the Jews, and is far better than the manna, which was called "the food of angels". Manna came from heaven but its eaters were still liable to corruption; the Eucharist came from above the heavens, and those who eat in faith escape corruption.

"The lesson of Genesis shows that the Eucharistic Feast is most ancient, for the synagogue came later and took its origin from the Law of Moses. Abraham was far earlier. After conquering the enemy, and recovering his own nephew, as he was enjoying his victory, Melchizedek met him and brought out those things, which Abraham reverently received. It was not Abraham who brought them out, but Melchizedek, who is introduced without father, without mother, having neither beginning of days, nor ending, but like the Son of God, of Whom Paul says, 'that He remains a priest forever'" (Hebrews 6:20).

"Do you recognize Who that is? Can a man be king of righteousness, when himself he can hardly be righteous? Can he be king of peace, when he can hardly be peaceable? He it is Who is without mother according to His Godhead, for He was begotten of God the Father, of one substance with the Father. He was without a father according to His Incarnation, for He was born of a Virgin; having neither beginning nor end, for He is the beginning and end of all things, the first and the last (Revelation 1:8, 11). The sacrament, then, which you received is the gift not of man but of God, brought out by Him Who blessed Abraham the father of faith, whose grace and deeds we admire."

²¹ Jesus had said, "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). We can draw near to God through the process of deification if we want to.

²² Ambrose of Milan, Concerning the Mysteries, VIII, 45-48.

“We have proved that the sacraments of the Church are the more ancient, we now recognize that they are superior. It is a marvelous thing that God rained manna on the fathers, and fed them with daily food from heaven; so that it is said, ‘So man ate angels’ food’ (Psalm 78:25). But yet all those who ate that food died in the wilderness; but that food which you receive, that living Bread which came down from heaven, furnishes the substance of eternal life; whosoever eats of this Bread shall never die; it is the Body of Christ.”

“Now consider whether the bread of angels is more excellent or the Flesh of Christ, which is indeed the body of life. That manna came from heaven, this is above the heavens; that was of heaven, this is of the Lord of the heavens; that was liable to corruption, if kept a second day, this is far from all corruption, for whoever shall taste it in a holy manner shall not be able to feel corruption. For them water flowed from the rock, for you Blood flowed from Christ; water satisfied them for a time, the Blood satiates you for eternity. The Jew drinks and thirsts again, you after drinking will be beyond the power of thirsting; that was in a shadow, this is in truth.”