

Eye-Opener Studies

Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18)

10: The Order of Melchizedek

‘It is witnessed of him, “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.”’ (Heb 7:17).

Ask Christians, ‘Who was Melchizedek and why is he important in the Scriptures?’ and many, if not most, often including preachers and teachers, may either never have heard of him or have only a scant knowledge of what he did and why he was and is important. We aim to rectify this in the next two studies and some of the conclusions might blow your minds, or at least cause a spiritual eyebrow to be raised.

Background and story

Melchizedek flits into Abraham’s life in Genesis 14:17, and flits out of it equally as quickly four verses later - that’s all. He reappears in Psalm 110:4, which is a Psalm of David, where he has the Lord declaring, “‘*You are a king forever after the order of Melchizedek,*”’ and this is definitely a messianic psalm. So David and his contemporaries knew exactly who Melchizedek was and why his everlasting priesthood is important, or this reference has no meaning at all in the times for which it was written. We will need to bear this in mind later in the study, as we do when we consider the main references to this man of mystery in the Book of Hebrews, chapters 5-7.

Abraham was still called Abram when he



Abraham meets Melchizedek

bumped into Melchizedek, but we’ll use the more familiar form throughout the study, unless actually quoting the Scriptures. His nephew Lot had moved into Sodom after the two had agreed to part, however local wars had seen him captured by raiders from the north and carried away, with all his possessions, plus women, children and servants. On hearing of this, Abraham mustered his own private army, some 318 men, and

chased after them, rescuing them from near the Damascus region. It was while coming back home to the south that he passed close to Salem (modern Jerusalem) and was met by Melchizedek. This is the Genesis account of their encounter:

‘After his return from the defeat of Chedorlamer 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. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he blessed him and said,

*“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Possessor of heaven and earth;
and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”
And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.’*

(Ge 14:17-20)

This may be a very brief encounter but it is remarkable because Abraham bowed down to him and gave him a tenth of his not inconsiderable 'everything'. Such an incident as recounted tells us instantly that they knew, or knew of, each other - the king voluntarily ensured that Abraham and his massive entourage of soldiers and rescued families were fed and watered - and Abraham knew that he was the inferior party in this encounter and honoured Melchizedek's superiority with a tithe. Melchizedek blessed Abraham not the other way around and the Hebrew Letter informs us that, *'It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.'* (Heb 7:7). Mysterious Melchizedek was superior to great Abraham. Abraham was the patriarch of promise and the father of the Jews, and their future as God's people lay in his loins. Thus the Jewish Levitical or Mosaic priesthood and ministry was, by this action, deemed to be inferior to that of Melchizedek. Again Hebrews spells it out quite clearly:

'See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham. But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. In the one case tithes are received by mortal men, but in the other case, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.' (Heb 7:4-10).

Jesus had to be presented to the Jewish believers as both sacrifice and High Priest. The sacrifice part they could easily accommodate but not His High Priestly function. They knew that Jesus was of *'the house and lineage of David'* (Luke 2:4) by both His mother and earthly father, who had to register in Bethlehem because of it at His birth. He was 'born of David's line' and therefore a descendant of Judah. Only Levites could be priests and only direct descendants of Aaron could be High Priests. Jesus did not and could not qualify. But He took His priestly office not from Levi and Aaron but from Melchizedek who was not born a priest but was appointed a High Priest and into a superior priesthood.

That argument must have cut to the quick with Jews who thought their religion was so special to God and had been over nearly 1500 years, to find that there was a superior one which was much older.

Who was Melchizedek?

So who was this Melchizedek, whom Abraham recognized as his superior, as also did David and the First century Jewish Christians to whom the Book of Hebrews was addressed - or even preached, as it actually reads as if it were a sermon? They must have known, but we have lost any direct reference to him helping us to identify him down these millennia. We can winkle it out, but the journey takes a little time, nevertheless it is a fascinating search and well worth the effort.

Melchizedek in the Book of Hebrews

Hebrews tells us that Melchizedek is a man of mystery. Chapter 7 verse 3 reads: *'He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.'* Now, if this verse is to be understood literally, then Melchizedek could be anything from an angelic being to the Word of God, the Second Person in the Godhead, appearing in a theophany. His priesthood then would not have been known to Abraham who would have encountered him miraculously and we could never know the truth. However, the narrative in Genesis does not read at all like this. Melchizedek's kingship and priesthood is well established in Jerusalem and Abraham seemed to know it. Such an encounter, if Melchizedek was an angelic-type being, would not have impacted on David or the First-Century Christians as it did. We would have to ask ourselves why God would apparently establish a miraculous, angelic priesthood in Jerusalem for a brief moment when a human-based, long-term one would do just as well if not better. No, this verse in Hebrews 7 indicates that there is a massive element of mystery surrounding Melchizedek which inspired awe in Abraham and those who knew who he was. Melchizedek belongs to another world lost in the mists of time past and his priesthood is not a temporary one but goes on for ever, until the end of time in the future. This was unlike the Aaronic priesthood which was *'obsolete and growing old [and] is ready to vanish away'* as the Hebrew writer told them (8:13). So, who was he? Let us try to unravel the mystery.

The importance of Salem (Jerusalem)

The first thing we notice is that Melchizedek's priesthood was established in Salem/Jerusalem. Here sacrifices to God were made even at this early period in the biblical story. Some years later its significance was to be further emphasized when Abraham was told to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. He had to

journey for three days to get to the specifically designated spot on a mountain in Moriah (Gen. 22:1-9). This is where later Solomon was to build his temple: on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem (2 Chron. 3:1). This certainly re-established Jerusalem as the spot where atoning sacrifices were to

be made under Moses, and God's Levitical priesthood was based there. Thus it is absolutely wonderful to see how the Lord emphasized this spot as the spot for such things because, of course, it was here that the final atoning sacrifice of Jesus was made once and for all, and from where He began His priesthood. Jerusalem was indeed a very special, holy place.

A priesthood of the Noachic Covenant

Melchizedek was a priest of the Noachic covenant, introduced after the Flood, with king/priests acting as intercessors. We remember that Jacob coveted this rôle and pulled a fast one over Esau in order to obtain it. This honour usually went to the first born and Jacob has been about twenty minutes too late! This covenant has never been revoked or superseded. Acts 15 shows this quite clearly. Christ only nailed the religious practices and observances of the Mosaic covenant to the Cross (Col.2:14). The promises given to Noah still hold good and its seal, the rainbow, means exactly the same as it did when he first saw it. Christ as our king/priest is the perma-

nent guarantor of this everlasting covenant, and so Melchizedek's priesthood is eternal, even though he himself was not.

Who could Melchizedek be?

If he were that important and a man Abraham knew was superior even to him, who could he be? Don't

be misled by his name, which means '*King of Righteousness*' (Heb. 7:2). Biblical people often went under several different names sometimes making identification difficult for us.

Looking back over the biblical records which relate to Abraham's time, and also before he was



**Salem, or Jerusalem, where Melchizedek lived as priest/king of God Most High.
The temple site, where the mosque now stands, is on Mount Moriah where
Abraham later came to offer Isaac as a sacrifice**

born, who stands out? Well, we have Adam, Seth, Enoch and Methuselah, who all died before the Flood, so Melchizedek can't be any of them. Then we have Noah, Shem, Ham and Japheth who are very well known, but who else? Well, nobody actually because after Shem the next truly important biblical giant is Abraham himself. Japheth and Ham, though very significant to the nations of the world, were not in Abraham's genealogy so he would not revere them as he would Shem and Noah. So could Melchizedek actually be Noah? Could he be Shem? Well, let's see.

The credentials of both Noah and Shem

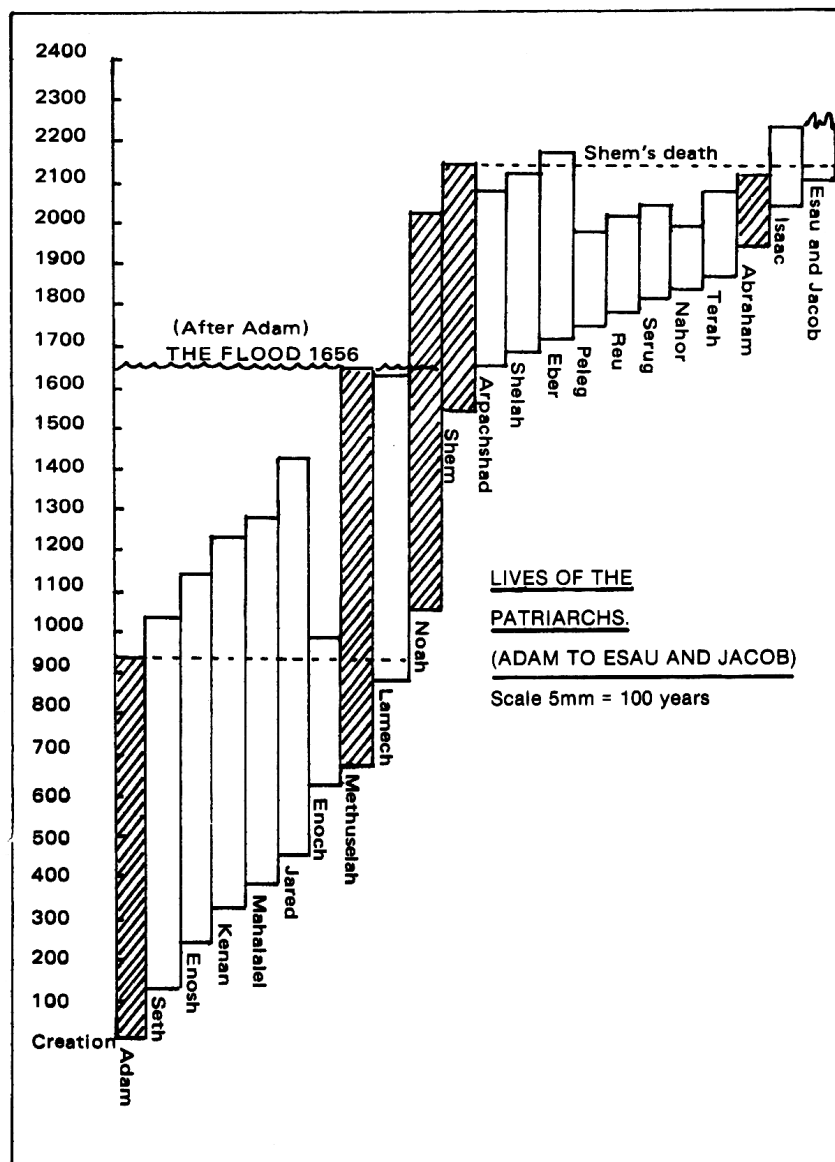
They both belonged to the mysterious 'other world' before the Flood. Many Christians do not appreciate just how different the post-Flood world was compared to the antediluvian one. It was the stuff of legends with dinosaurs, tall ferns and trees, giant-sized ferocious men (Gen. 6:1-4), no rain, no mountains, no continents (just one huge land mass), no Polar ice caps, and a warm, pleasant temperature all year. And this is just the half of it but it will do for now.

It is a detailed study in itself and this summarizes conclusions from such studies*. Men, and presumably women, lived enormous numbers of years, all of which changed dramatically after the Flood, though in Abraham's time it still had not bottomed out at around 70.

Both Noah and Shem could go back to Adam in just two steps: both knew Methuselah (Noah for 500 years and Shem for 98), and Methuselah knew Adam for 253 years. What knowledge could they tell about the past and the history of the world! What wisdom and spiritual understanding could they impart to others! What examples of faithfulness could they give to later generations! But could Melchizedek actually be either of them? Here's where all those boring genealogies in Genesis 5 and 10, paralleled in 1 Chronicles 1, etc., the bits we all see no point in and skip over quickly, come into their own (see the chart, right)!

We often forget that Noah lived for 349 years after the Flood and Shem lived for another 500. Just how did they spend their time? No doubt serving God faithfully as they always had. The Bible is silent on this so we can only speculate about it. Abraham was born in 1948 AM (Anno Mundi, after Creation) and Noah died in 2006 AM. Thus their lives overlapped by 58 years! Shem carried on until he died in 2158 AM. Believe it or not, Shem actually outlived Abraham by 35 years and Jacob was 70 when he died! Amazing, once you realize it.

If Shem and Noah carried on serving God as king/priests, as we have every right to assume that they did, they would carry all the necessary credentials to be identified as Melchizedek. On meeting either of them, Abram would have no trouble recognizing them as his superiors in every possible way; and knowing who Melchizedek actually was, nor would David or First-Century Jewish Christians. This man was superior even to their beloved Abra-



ham, as he himself readily acknowledged.

The final clue and identification

Well we can know which of them was Melchizedek. You see, Abraham was 75 when he left Haran to go south under God's direction and the encounter with Melchizedek came later. Noah had died when Abraham was 58, as we said earlier, so, if Melchizedek can be identified with either of them, he has to be **SHEM**.

Abraham was a Shemite, now called a Semite, so he would automatically bow down to his illustrious forefather and both desire and accept his blessing. It makes absolute sense when you realize it.

Summing up

* You can find details in the *Genesis Accepted* magazines which can be viewed at www.greatbarrchurchofchrist.org

We do not require any further proof of this identification. However, it is very interesting to note that books of Jewish myths and legends, the compilation of the material for which dates from around the time of Christ, always talk about Melchizedek/Shem. This positive identification is not made in the Scriptures as we said earlier, though we can get to the truth by using them, but the Jews knew for many years who he was. It's a bit like Calvary. The Bible nowhere calls it a 'hill', nor tells us exactly where it was; they all knew that in New Testament times. And they all knew Melchizedek was Shem. Fortunately the Holy Spirit left us sufficient information to enable us to work it out in our day.

So, there we have it. The identification fits and makes sense. It only does so providing we accept the Genesis account as being reliable and historically accurate. This is why so many fail to spot it because they assume that Noah and Shem were long since dead when Abraham was born. That's just not so. Modern scholarship would pour scorn on such reasoning because it cannot handle the genealogies presented in Genesis.

Those other opinions

I presented the bulk of the above in the very first Number of *Genesis Accepted*. It raised some eyebrows, as I expected it would. One sister wrote to me a nice letter telling me: '*Melchizedek could not have been a man for he had no parents, no beginning of days nor end of life, no genealogy.*' She wasn't at all upset with me because she concluded: 'Thank you again for making us think'. There are essentially two other opinions, which we touched on briefly under 'Melchizedek in the Book of Hebrews', and they are that he was an angel, and the most common alternative of all is that he was the pre-incarnate Christ in one of His theophanies, which we find in the Old Testament, e.g. in the Garden of Eden and Abraham's encounter with the Lord and two angels just before the destruction of Sodom (Genesis 18 and 19). In the third issue of *Genesis Accepted* I addressed these opinions once more, and we need to look at them specifically here because these are seriously held and respected opinions.

Study background

This subject is an exciting one for students of the Bible. It is a quintessential topic for it involves digging across several Books and verses, historical analysis, seeing human beings such as we are involved in it, and coming to a conclusion, being honest with Scripture and not wresting conclusions from spurious exegesis. However, in this instance the conclusions are non-threatening for they are not salvation issues at all, so the debate can be objective and non-contentious, i.e. you can disagree with me all you like and we need never fall out!

In 1982 I published a book called *Speak Through the Earthquake, Wind And Fire*. As part of it I drew the chart of the patriarchs we have printed

in this study and noted, to my surprise because nobody had ever pointed it out to me, that both Noah and Shem were still alive when Abraham was born and that Shem outlived him and could have known Isaac, Esau and Jacob. I did not then make the connection with Melchizedek. In 1988 I purchased a book entitled *Ancient Israel, Myths and Legends*, Angelo Rappoport, 1987, The Mystic Press. The myths and legends dated from around the time of Christ so were what Jewish people would know about, just as we 'know' about Robin Hood. There will be truth and fiction all mixed up



in them because they are not in the Bible but they shed a good deal of light on many ancient stories, and present us with possibilities we may not get from the plain reading of Scripture, especially about these ancient times from Genesis. In it I learned of the link between Melchizedek and Shem because he is always called 'Melchizedek/Shem' in the legends. This is assumed and not commented on, so I began to dig to see if it was a sustainable idea. Later, in the 1990s, I bought another two volumes called *Legends of Old Testament Characters*, by Rev. Sabine Baring-Gould, M.A. (1871), the author of the hymn 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. In it he too identified Melchizedek as Shem - so it's not a new idea, nor my dreamed-up solution to the problem. I determined to study it for myself to see a) if it could be so, and b) if it was so, since I have never yet found anybody in the brotherhood who has pub-

lished anything on the subject. My conclusion is out, as you are well aware of by now.

Hebrews 7:3

The supernatural understanding springs out of one verse in Hebrews 7:3. As we have already seen, this says of Melchizedek: *'He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest for ever.'* This obviously is an important verse and must be taken very seriously. We can't pencil it out simply because it upsets our theories.

The Jewish understanding was that it was Shem Abraham was dealing with and the Hebrew writer must also have been aware of this. The fact that Abraham had to know who Melchizedek was, and that Melchizedek's priesthood was superior to his own (vs. 7), is a powerful clue. This would be a most consistent view were it not for Hebrews 7:3, which upsets the appletart.

One of the problems when we deal with imagery and metaphor in Scripture is that we are dealing with a book written thousands of years ago for a Middle Eastern audience. Their mode of expression is not always consistent with ours. They loved hyperbole, exaggeration for effect, and Jesus was a master of its form. Unfortunately we, with our more literal reading of the words, sometimes fail to recognize it for what it is, for the words can have a literal interpretation. Sometimes we manage the exercise successfully; if we didn't we should be able to identify honest Christians by the fact that they limp around with only one foot, one hand and one eye. Read Matthew 18:7-9 to see what I mean.

Is this one of those flowery verses never intended to be taken literally, or do we have to stick with the words exactly as written? I wish to contend that this is not intended to convey that Melchizedek was a complete man of mystery, since they knew who he was, but that the writer was expressing

qualities in Melchizedek which made him an important messianic Old Testament figure.

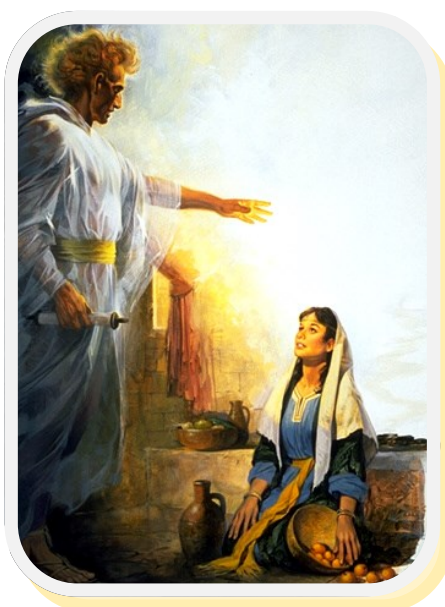
Accept, for the moment, that he was Shem. Here was a man who belonged to another world, whose birth was lost in the mists of time. We know who his father was but nobody knows his mother's name. He grew up amidst wickedness such as we have never known. He did not know clouds or rain, mountains, ice and snow, or seasons. He witnessed their introduction into the physical world. He walked with dinosaurs! The land was one whole super-continent and all language was one, when he was born. Indeed his language disappeared at Babel and it's possible thereafter he could not communicate even with Japheth and Ham and maybe even Noah. He'd been around for so long that he was a man of mystery with tales to tell of life before the Flood, of Methuselah, his great-grandfather, whom he knew and who knew Adam. Now not only had his world changed, his name and function on Earth, as priest/king of Salem (Jerusalem) had also altered. The picture is clear: Melchizedek was not of this world at all, for the post-Flood world was nothing at all like the pre-Flood world. So I want to maintain

that this is not to be understood literally but rather is a lovely example of metaphor, used in genuine Hebraic style for effect. However, I have other reasons for rejecting the supernatural interpretation of Melchizedek's identity, because I think that understanding creates far more problems than it solves, apart from doing violence to Moses's presentation of him in Genesis.

The Angel Option

Angels, as we know, *'are ministering spirits sent to serve those who are to inherit salvation'* (Heb. 1:14). They come with urgent messages (Acts 12:7

-9), made glad tidings of great joy (Luke 2:10), announced the coming birth of both John the Baptist and Jesus (Luke 1), blocked the path of Balaam and his ass (Numbers 22:22ff) and so on. Every time there is urgency in their dealings and usually fear in the hearts of those to whom the message is being given (Luke 2:9).



The angel visits Mary

If Abraham's meeting was with an angelic being, it was like no other in the Bible and it struck no 'mighty dread' in a troubled mind. He's on the way home and his men need feeding as they pass Jerusalem. Out comes the king/priest Melchizedek and provides for them, blesses Abraham as he goes on his way, Abraham bows to him and gives him a tithe, and off he pops. It was all very civil and 'normal'.

This king/priest of Salem had an established ministry serving God Most High, and you don't do that on a fleeting visit. God never sent an angel to remain for months or years on Earth. I think the longest any angel remained here was about 24 hours in the Sodom incident.

But there is another objection to the Angel Hypothesis and that is that angels are always messengers not intermediaries. A priest stands between God and man and intercedes for him. Intercession is simply not an angelic function and this is important to recognize. Paul warns against people who would want to include angels in a spiritual hierarchy (Col.2:18) and there are heretical sects who would love to have Melchizedek as an angel, thereby making him a type of whom Jesus was the antitype. Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus is the Archangel Michael who was the first born, not the firstborn, of all creation. (The difference is that 'first born' means the oldest or first created but the 'firstborn' means the pre-eminent one, Col. 1:15-20). If Melchizedek could be identified as being an angel, so too could Jesus by association, so for all these reasons I rejected the Angel Hypothesis.

The Pre-incarnate Christ Option

This theory too poses more questions than it answers. There is no doubt that the pre-incarnate Christ, the Second Person in the Trinity, the Word of God, did come down to Earth during Old Testament times. The passage cited above where Abraham bartered for Sodom is one such instance. There seems little doubt that it was this figure whom Adam and Eve used to meet in the Garden before they sinned and from whom they hid because they were naked, once they had sinned. Such visitations are called 'theophanies', and make an interesting study

in their own right. However, like angelic visitations, they never occurred over a long period of time and, once again, we have to acknowledge that Melchizedek was an established king/priest in Salem. For this to be Christ would defy the normal pattern of these theophanies.

However there are other objections. This was a priesthood which was established forever so why did Jesus have to come to establish another one if He'd already set one up? This everlasting priesthood was based on the Noachian covenant which indeed has never been revoked and its promises still hold good until the world ends. The Law which Jesus 'nailed to the cross' (Col. 2:14) was the ceremonial Law of Moses. Christ did not have to come to establish Noah's covenant and to act as one of its priests; indeed this would be almost an insult to Him to make Him just one priest amongst many. What was more natural than that one of Noah's sons assumed the king/priest mantle after Noah's death and maybe acting as a separate, independent priest once Babel had divided the nations? If Christ could establish a legitimate, everlasting priesthood before the Cross, why was the Cross necessary in order for Him to establish another, legitimate, everlasting priesthood? Couldn't God make up His mind how he wanted to do it? If Christ came and established an imperfect priesthood once, why do we have confidence that second time around He got it right? He cannot be both the type and the antitype, the earthly figure and the heavenly reality. He cannot be both a messianic figure and the Messiah.

Conclusion

No, Melchizedek has to be a normal human being. If he is not Shem and I am wrong in my identification, he must forever remain as an unknown, mysterious figure. That is a legitimate understanding of the situation; however, I find this to be most unsatisfactory when there is a logical candidate in Shem, who fits the bill perfectly once the truth of the Genesis record is accepted.

In our next study, on Salvation, we will note the significance of Melchizedek's priesthood and why it is superior to that of Aaron.

Tasks: Study the chart on page 4 carefully and comment on what you notice. What surprised you? What lessons did you learn? What questions does it raise and how would you answer them?