

## JUST LIKE MELCHIZEDEK

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The problems faced by translators and interpreters of the New Testament can be divided, at least from one point of view, into two groups. On the one hand, there are obvious difficulties, so big that no one can overlook them. On the other hand, there are difficulties which seem at first sight so small that they can easily be missed, producing a misleading translation. The small difficulties are most dangerous when they arise, so to speak, in the shadow of big ones. As a notice beside French level crossings puts it: "BEWARE—one train may hide another."

The translation of the phrase "after the order of Melchizedek" (RSV, Ps 110.4; Heb 5.6, 10; 6.20; 7.11, 17) is a good example of this danger. The chapters in the Letter to the Hebrews which deal with Melchizedek are some of the most difficult in the New Testament (though perhaps more difficult for preachers and other interpreters than for translators). Congregations have been known to get completely lost, and then burst out laughing when the reader reaches Heb 7.15: "The argument becomes still clearer . . ." (NEB). There is nothing wrong with the translation; but what was clear to the author of Hebrews (whoever he or she was), and probably to the first readers of the letter, is no longer clear to us. Melchizedek will always be a problem, and the discovery of Qumran texts which mention him, far from solving the difficulties of Hebrews, has probably made them even more complicated.

But this article is not about Melchizedek. In the shadow of this big, obvious problem, there is a smaller one which translators have often ignored: What is this "order" of Melchizedek of which traditional translations (and also J. B. Phillips) speak?

A round-up of the collection of translations on my shelf produced the following result, as far as Hebrews is concerned.

### *Common language translations (CLTs)*

TEV 1st–3rd editions	in the priestly order of Melchizedek
TEV 4th American edition	as the successor of Melchizedek
TEV 4th British edition	in the line of succession from Melchizedek
except 7.11 (both editions)	one who is the successor of Melchizedek
French CLT	in the order of Melchizedek
German CLT 5.6,10; 7.17	(just) like Melchizedek
7.11	like Melchizedek
6.20	according to Melchizedek's kind
Spanish CLT	of the same class as Melchizedek
except 7.11	of Melchizedek's class

### *Other modern translations*

Jerusalem Bible	of the order of Melchizedek
except 7.11	of the same order as Melchizedek

NEB Moffatt	in the succession of Melchizedek with the rank of Melchizedek
<i>Vulgate</i> (Latin) except 5.10	according to the order of Melchizedek like the order of Melchizedek

The writer to the Hebrews is, of course, quoting from Ps 110.4, in the Greek version. Modern translations of the Old Testament are of course made directly from the Hebrew, but they do not normally feel any need to translate Ps 110.4 differently from the places at which it is quoted in Hebrews. The *Good News Bible* (TEV) has "in the line of succession to Melchizedek" in Ps 110.4; but in this case, "to" and "from" mean much the same in English! Moffatt's translation of the psalm verse is quite different from his translation of Hebrews: "a priest as once Melchizedek was". The Peshitta (Syriac) translation of the Old Testament, which is based on the Greek, has "after the likeness of Melchizedek".

Without quoting any more translations, it is possible to see three main ways of understanding the difficult phrase. They may be set out as follows:

1. There are two *orders* or *successions* of priests (rather like the succession of bishops in the Roman Catholic Church and some other churches). One series consists of Aaron and his descendants (Heb 7.11); the other, as far as we know, consists of Melchizedek and his only successor, Christ.
2. There are priests of two *ranks*: Melchizedek, who is "like the Son of God" (Heb 7.3, TEV), is of one rank; Aaron and his descendants are of a different and lower rank (compare Heb 7.23–24, 28).
3. Christ is simply *like* Melchizedek, and Melchizedek is *like* Christ, as Hebrews says, using different Greek words, in 7.15 and 7.3.

Which of these interpretations is most likely to be right? What do the experts say?

The Greek word translated in these different ways is *taxis*. Arndt and Gingrich's standard dictionary of New Testament Greek gives four possible meanings:

1. "Fixed succession or order", as in Lk 1.8, where Zechariah, the father-to-be of John the Baptist, is said to be "taking his turn in the daily service" (TEV).
2. "(Good) order", as in 1 Cor 14.40, which TEV translates: "Everything must be done in an . . . orderly way".
3. "Position, post", a meaning not found in the New Testament.
4. "Nature, quality, manner, condition, appearance".

The second and third of these senses are impossible in Hebrews. The first meaning is the one chosen by TEV and some other translations. Arndt and Gingrich themselves, however, have a special note on the fourth meaning:

"Perhaps it is in this way that Hebrews understood" Ps 110.4, "which he interprets to mean that Jesus was a high priest . . . 'according to the nature of = just like Melchizedek'. In any case the reference is not only to the higher 'rank', but also to the entirely different nature of Melchizedek's priesthood as compared with that of Aaron, 7.11." In other words, Arndt and Gingrich agree with the German CLT (or the other way round!), seem to disagree with Moffatt, and probably disagree with TEV as well.

Among the commentaries, at least one of the most detailed "sits on the fence", not choosing between the various possible meanings. A translator cannot, or at least should not, do this if he is to be fair to his readers. Michel, in his great German commentary, recommends a flexible approach, judging each case on its merits, in the spirit of meaningful translation. This, as we have seen, is done by those translations which treat Heb 7.11, in which Melchizedek is contrasted with Aaron, differently from the verses in Hebrews which directly quote Ps 110.4. Some commentators, including F. F. Bruce (1964), accept the idea of "succession"; others, including T. H. Robinson (1933) and H. W. Montefiore (1964), prefer "rank". Moffatt is a particularly interesting case. In his translation, he uses "rank"; but in his commentary (1924), he writes: "*taxis* for the writer, as 7.15 proves, has a general meaning; Jesus has the rank of a Melchizedek, he is a priest of the Melchizedek sort of order, though in the strict sense of the term there was no *taxis* or succession of Melchizedek priests".

The last words touch the heart of the problem. Two priests, Melchizedek and Christ, do not make up a *succession*. The reason for this is not, as one might think, that they were born hundreds of years apart, so that the succession was broken. The reason, according to Hebrews, is that both Melchizedek and Christ are eternal (though this word is not directly used of Melchizedek): Melchizedek, like Christ, is one of whom there is "no record of his death" (Heb 7.3); he is "one who lives" (verse 6), just as Jesus "lives on for ever" (verse 24) and has "a life which has no end" (verse 16, TEV).

Nor does Hebrews emphasize the idea of *rank*. In speaking of Jesus, the author uses the titles "priest" and "high priest" without distinction. As Heb 7.20-28 show in detail, the difference between Christ and Aaron is much more than a difference of rank.

There remains the simple translation "*just like Melchizedek*". There is no succession to Melchizedek, and even Heb 7.23 is not really about a succession to Aaron. As for Ps 110.4, the Roman Catholic scholar J. A. Fitzmyer has written: "whatever the puzzling Hebrew phrase . . . means, no one has ever suggested that it be understood in terms of hereditary succession". In Hebrews, the word *taxis* is used to mean essentially the same as when it is said that Melchizedek "is like the Son of God" (7.3), or that Christ "is like Melchizedek" (7.15, TEV).

Now if this is right, it will affect the way in which we translate Heb 7.24 also. This verse describes Christ's work as priest by using the word *aparabatos*, which is found in secular writings, but nowhere else in the Greek Bible. On this, Arndt and Gingrich comment that the word "is usually interpreted 'without a successor' ". That is how all editions of TEV understand it,

together with French and Spanish common language translations, Moffatt and J. B. Phillips. "But", Arndt and Gingrich go on, "this meaning is found nowhere else. 'Aparabatos' rather has the sense 'permanent, unchangeable'." This is in fact the meaning chosen by RSV ("permanently"), NEB ("perpetual"), the Jerusalem Bible (" . . . can never lose his priesthood"), Knox ("unchanging"), and also the German CLT.

The idea of a priestly succession is unnecessary, both in Hebrews' quotations of Ps 110.4, and in Hebrews' own description of the priestly work of Christ, in 7.24. Christ, for Hebrews, is a priest, or high priest, "just like Melchizedek", who "can never lose his priesthood".

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## THE TRANSLATION OF LUKE 11.5-13

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### Introduction

This section comes within a slightly longer passage where Jesus gives teaching about prayer in response to a request from one of the disciples (versel). Verses 2 to 4 of the passage contain the Lord's prayer, which will not be considered here because the kind of comments we would make about it can be found on page 97 of *Translators' Notes on Literacy Selections*, Part 2. (Eugene A. Nida, UBS, 1974.) There the form of the Lord's prayer found in Matthew's gospel is dealt with.

Verses 5-13, immediately following the Lord's prayer, contain further teaching on prayer. Verses 5-8 record an illustration given by Jesus about perseverance in prayer. Verses 9 to 13 seem to consist of a commentary on the illustration, as well as more teaching based on a comparison between the response of an earthly father to his son's request and that of God the heavenly Father to requests from his earthly sons. Some of this material, the illustration about the midnight visit of the friend, is found only in Luke's gospel. The rest of it, with some significant difference of detail, is found in Matthew 7.7-11.

Because the RSV is widely used by translators as their basic source text, we shall refer to it in this discussion. Although RSV follows the Greek text fairly closely, its English form creates certain problems, particularly for a translator who does not speak English as his first language. It is with this kind of translator in mind that these notes have been written. Many of the points to be discussed have actually arisen during work among translators in the South Pacific. Translation Consultants in other areas have no doubt come across the same kinds of problems.

### Verse 5

"*And he said to them, . . .*" Although Jesus is the speaker, he is not actually named, either here or in the preceding verses of the chapter. Following closely the Greek's preference for the pronoun rather than the proper name, RSV