

What does the Bible say about Reincarnation?

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I recently received an email that asked me a question about reincarnation. More specifically, the question centered around Melchizedek and if perhaps the way he is described in Hebrews 7 suggests at least the possibility of reincarnation. Here is the text, followed by my reply.

“For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. 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” ([Heb. 7:1-3](#))

The story of Melchizedek is indeed a strange one, but it doesn't support the notion of reincarnation. There are numerous proposals as to his identity. But let's begin with Genesis 14 where Melchizedek first appears.

After his [i.e., 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. (He was priest of God Most High.) And he [Melchizedek] blessed him [Abraham] 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 [Melchizedek] a tenth of everything ([Genesis 14:17-20](#)).

Some believe Melchizedek is an angel, possibly the archangel Michael. Others have suggested Shem, the son of Noah. But Shem's genealogy is explicitly set forth in Genesis 11 whereas [Hebrews 7:3](#) says Melchizedek has no genealogy. Many believe that Melchizedek was God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, before his incarnation in the person of Jesus. Theologians call this phenomenon a “theophany” or a manifestation of God in human form; not an incarnation, but a momentary, passing appearance in human form. But v. 3 says he “resembles” or is “like” the Son of God, not that he “is” the Son of God.

But everything points to the idea that Melchizedek was a genuine human being, a literal, historical man who served as the King of a literal, historical city called Salem. But here is the key. Given the way Melchizedek is portrayed in the OT, he serves as a type of the Son of God. A “type” was simply a person or event that prefigured or foreshadowed the coming of Christ. Adam in the Garden of Eden was a type of Christ. David, King of Israel, was a type of Christ. Jonah and his experience in the belly of the fish for three days was a type of Christ and his three days in the grave. And there are numerous others. So too was Melchizedek.

Let’s look at how he is described.

(1) We begin with his rule: he is king of Salem, priest of the Most High God. Salem is clearly an early reference to what we know as Jerusalem.

(2) We then note his name: the Hebrew word “*melek*” means king and the word “*tsedek*” means righteousness. Thus Melchizedek = king of righteousness, as v. 2 indicates. Even in his name, then, he is a type of Jesus Christ, for Jesus is the true King of Righteousness. And insofar as “Salem” means peace, Melchizedek was the king of peace in anticipation of Jesus as the glorious Prince of Peace.

(3) Next we see how Melchizedek served as a type of the coming Christ. It is seen in what the OT does not say about him. I repeat that. It is found in what the OT story does NOT say about him. Notice the description in v. 3 – he is without father or mother, he lacks a genealogy, and he is portrayed as one who was neither born nor died.

He is not saying that Melchizedek was some sort of biological anomaly as though he was hatched or was brought to earth by the proverbial stork. Of course he had a father and mother. Of course his genealogy could be traced through history. Of course he was born and eventually died. But the Scriptures intentionally omit any reference to his parents and it is that silence that forms the basis for his being a type of Christ. That he has no genealogy was stunning, given the fact that genealogies are so prominent all through the OT. In fact, Melchizedek is the only individual among the true worshipers of God whose ancestors and descendants are not mentioned.

And again, “having neither beginning of days nor end of life” doesn’t mean he wasn’t born at a particular time and died at a particular time. It simply means that we have no record of his birth or death in Scripture.

It is, of course, of God the Son that he was a type. When the incarnation occurred, Jesus clearly had a mother, Mary, and his birth and death are explicitly recorded for us. So too is his genealogy in both Matthew and Luke. Thus it the eternal being of the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, of whom Melchizedek was a type.

I should also point out the silence of Genesis concerning the termination of Melchizedek's priesthood and its silence concerning anyone who might have succeeded him in that office. This finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ who was appointed by God to be a priest "forever" (6:20; 7:17, 21, 24). No one succeeds him in this office because he has his priesthood "by the power of an indestructible life" (7:16).

So let me sum up. Our author is saying that this man Melchizedek resembled the Son of God based on what Scripture does *not* say concerning him. Insofar as the biblical record is concerned, Melchizedek was "like" the eternal Son of God and that he typified or foreshadowed the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ.

But why are these particular omissions in the biblical record of such great importance? What significance is there in the fact that Melchizedek is described as one without a father, mother, or genealogy? The answer is this: these were all absolutely essential for determining who could serve as a priest after the order of Aaron! A man's pedigree was of immeasurable significance for the OT, Aaronic priesthood. A man being considered for the priesthood had to prove conclusively that his mother was an Israelite and his father not only an Israelite but also of the tribe of Levi. Even more than that, he had to provide evidence that he was of the family of Aaron (see [Num. 16:39-40](#); [Ezra 2:61-62](#)).

Furthermore, no Aaronic priest retained his priesthood forever (see [Num. 8:23-25](#)). There were term limits for serving as a priest! And eventually all of them died. But Jesus lives forever!

Thus in this way our author is telling us that Jesus Christ serves as our Great High Priest on completely different terms from those of the Old Covenant. But not just "different" terms: superior and better terms!

As for reincarnation, [Hebrews 9:27-28](#) is one of many texts that refutes the notion. There we read that "just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."

Note carefully the words “just as” at the beginning of v. 27 and the word “so” at the start of v. 28. Clearly he is drawing a parallel between the death of Jesus Christ and the death of all humans. Christ died once. He offered himself to die on the cross as a sacrifice for sin only once. So also every human being dies only once. The NT does speak of a “second death” but that is not a second physical death. The “second death” in Revelation is the final spiritual death that perpetuates for eternity an unbeliever’s separation from God.

According to Hinduism, your lot in life right now is the result of how you behaved in a previous life. They call this the principle of karma. In other words, if you are healthy and wealthy now, if you are in a position of power and influence, this is a reward from good deeds you performed in a former life. If you are suffering and deprived now, you are only getting what you deserve from the failures and sins you committed in a previous incarnation. At best you can strive to improve your future life by laboring to do good now. In this way you might increase the odds of being re-born in the next life at a higher level of existence.

The aim of Buddhists, who also believe in reincarnation, is to finally and forever escape this seemingly endless cycle of birth, death, and re-birth, and enter into a state of nothingness called Nirvana, which means “extinguishing” or “ceasing to exist.” Tibetan Buddhism, of which the Dalai Lama is the well-known leader, believes that when you die your soul resides in a dreamlike state called *Bardo* for 49 days. It is during this period of seven weeks that one’s ultimate destiny is determined. The virtuous or those who lived righteously in this life may be set free from the cycle of reincarnation and enter into Nirvana. For all the rest, karma pulls them into yet another reincarnation.

Well-known celebrities such as actors Richard Gere, Sharon Stone, and Steven Seagal embrace it. Steve Jobs, of Apple fame, was an advocate and practitioner of Zen Buddhism until his death. So too is Phil Jackson, who served as coach of the Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers of the NBA.

But our author is quite clear: all men die only once. Now of course there are a couple of notable exceptions in the Bible. I have in mind people like Lazarus who are miraculously raised from the dead and then must eventually die again. But note well that those who die and are raised are raised back into the same identity they had in this present existence. They do not die only to live again in another era of time, with a different name and another identity. Lazarus was raised to live in the same town and with the same two sisters, Mary and Martha, in the same period of

history in which he formerly lived. So, one cannot appeal to biblical instances of resurrection to prove the possibility of reincarnation. Lazarus was not incarnated a second time in another body but was raised in the same body in which he had first died and in that same body he eventually died again.