Shem = Melchizedek?

Alma E. Gygi, Ensign, November 1972, pp. 15-16.

... In this patriarchal order of priesthood, Shem stands next to Noah. He held the keys to the priest-hood and was the great high priest of his day. [Joseph F. Smith, Gospel Doctrine, p. 474; D&C 138:41.]

Living contemporary with Shem was a man known as Melchizedek, who was also known as the great high priest. [D&C 107:2; Hebr 7:4; Alma 13:17; Gen 14:18-20.] The scriptures give us the details of Shem’s birth and ancestry but are silent as to his ministry and later life. Of Melchizedek, however, the opposite is true. Nothing is recorded about his birth or ancestry, even though the Book of Mormon states that he did have a father. (Alma 13:17-18.) Concerning his ministry and life we have several interesting and important facts. (Gen 14:18-20; Hebr 4:1-4; Alma 13:17-18.)

All of this provokes some questions and calls for answers. Were there two high priests presiding at the same time? Why is the record silent concerning Shem’s ministry? Why is nothing known concerning Melchizedek’s ancestry?

Because of this state of knowledge on our part, many Saints and gospel scholars have wondered if these men were the same person. The truth is, we do not know the answer. But an examination of the scriptures is fascinating, because it seems to indicate that these men may have been one and the same. For example, here is the case for their oneness:

1. The inheritance given to Shem included the land of Salem. Melchizedek appears in scripture as the king of Salem, who reigns over this area.
2. Shem, according to later revelation, reigned in righteousness and the priesthood came through him. Melchizedek appears on the scene with a title that means “king of righteousness.”
3. Shem was the great high priest of his day. Abraham honored the high priest Melchizedek by seeking a blessing at his hands and paying him tithes.
4. Abraham stands next to Shem in the patriarchal order of the priesthood and would surely have received the priesthood from Shem; but D&C 84:5-17 says Abraham received the priesthood from Melchizedek.
5. Jewish tradition identifies Shem as Melchizedek. [“When Abraham returned from the war, Shem, or, as he is sometimes called, Melchizedek, the king of righteousness, priest of the Most High God....” (Ginsberg, Legends of the Jews, p. 233.) “Jewish tradition pronounces Melchizedek to be a survivor of the Deluge [Flood], the patriarch Shem.” (Smith’s Bible Dictionary, p. 393.) “And Adonizedek king of Jerusalem, the same was Shem....” (Book of Jasher 16:11.)]
6. President Joseph F. Smith’s remarkable vision [D&C 138:41] names Shem among the great patriarchs, but no mention is made of Melchizedek.
7. Times & Seasons (vol. 6, p. 746) [John Taylor, editor] speaks of “Shem, who was Melchizedek.” [Lundwall, Lectures on Faith, (Bookcraft, n.d.), p. 93.]

On the other hand, there is a case for their being two distinct personalities. Many persons believe D&C 84:14 is proof that there are perhaps several generations between Melchizedek and Noah. The scripture says, “Which Abraham received the priesthood from Melchizedek, who received it through the lineage of his fathers, even till Noah.”

If it does turn out that Shem and Melchizedek are the same person, this scripture should prove no stumbling block, because it could be interpreted to mean that priesthood authority commenced with Adam and came through the fathers, even till Noah, and then to Shem.