

Melchizedek Through the Testaments

In Genesis 14, there is to be found a very enigmatic character by the name of Melchizedek. This personality moves quickly in and out of the narrative with very little mention, only to arise again later in the biblical text in Psalm 110 and Hebrews 5-7. However, in these latter two mentions, nothing new is gleaned concerning this enigma. Furthermore, because Melchizedek is used to describe Christ in some way in Hebrews, his existence becomes very important for a Christian understand of Jesus. Yet, the person of Melchizedek and his literary significance must be studied first in Genesis and Psalms before any judgment may be made concerning the text of Hebrews.

Melchizedek in Genesis 14:

Melchizedek seems to appear out of nowhere in the narrative of Genesis 14. This chapter is concerned with Abram (Abraham) as he deals with the invasion of eastern kings into Canaan. This passage is widely thought to have a non-Israelite source behind it due to the use of the word “Hebrew” in verse 13. This is because the only use of his term is by non-Israelites to describing the Israelites.¹ However, that ancient source has been literarily absorbed into the larger unity of the Abraham-Lot cycle in the text.² Little is stated concerning who Melchizedek was, and the little that is said is very imprecise. There are three statements made about the person of Melchizedek. First, his name is given (“melchi-zedek”, “mlk-zdk”). Second, he is the king of Salem. Third, he is a priest of the most high god (“el-elyon”). Each of these must be considered in turn.

¹ Wenham, Gordon J. *Word Biblical Commentary Volume 1: Genesis 1-15* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987) 313.

² Ibid, 307.

The word “melchi-zedek” has many possibilities as far as its possible meaning goes. There are three tenable translations for these two words as they appear in this context. The first is “my king is Sedeq”, the second is “Milku is righteous”, and the third is “my king is righteous/legitimate.”³ There are two parallel arguments concerning what translation should be prepared. The first asserts that one of the former two should be preferred due to the commonality of theophoric names in the ancient near east.⁴ However, this argument need not be considered the best answer. It must be wondered what is going on in the passage as far as the literary context is concerned. In verse 2, the text reveals that an alliance of eastern kings is arrayed against an alliance of Canaanite kings. This Canaanite alliance is lead by the king of Sodom, whose name is “Bera”. This word is the Hebrew word for “evil” and, once this is recognized, a striking literary parallelism can be seen between the evil king of Sodom and the righteous king of Salem. Because of this, it is probable that the name “melchi-zedek” is used in this way to create a literary comparison. If Melchizedek was a historic character found in the ancient source, it is not unreasonable to suspect that his name has been manipulated to a degree in order to produce this literary contrast.

Melchizedek is called the king of Salem. This has been traditionally taken to be a reference to Jerusalem.⁵ However, it has been argued that Salem is a reference to Shechem due to archeological attestation of the full designation “Jerusalem” early in the city’s history. However, tradition accepts it as a reference to Jerusalem as can be seen in Psalm 110. Yet, the author of Hebrews takes Salem to mean “peace”. It is possible to construct the Hebrew “shalom,” which means “peace,” from the three consonants (“slm”) that comprise what is generally translated as Salem. This translation is very interesting within the literary context of

³ Ibid, 316.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Speiser, E. A. *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1962) 104.

Genesis 14. It has already been explained that Sodom was a wicked city (Genesis 13:13) and that the king of Sodom was evil (14:2). Also, the king of Sodom goes out to make war with the eastern kings (14:8) and actually instigates their military action in the first place (14:4). This is another stark contrast to Melchizedek, the righteous king of peace.

Finally, Melchizedek is called a priest of the most high god, “el-elyon.” This is the god in whose name Melchizedek blesses Abram. “El” was the supreme god of the Canaanite pantheon and his name is often modified by some epithet, such as “elyon.”⁶ It is interesting that in the text, Melchizedek uses this god’s name personally whereas Abram uses it only in a descriptive sense with reference to YHWH.⁷ Abram’s reference to YHWH is generally considered to be a gloss by the later J-editor,⁸ but, literarily, it is tenable to see it as part of the original compilation. In this way, Abram could have been renaming Melchizedek’s “el-elyon” and introducing this priest to YHWH. Of course, arguing correctly that the author of Hebrews seems to see “el-elyon” as a surname for YHWH could challenge this assumption.⁹

In light of all this, it becomes clear that the significance of Melchizedek in Genesis 14 is in contrast to Bera, the king of Sodom. Whereas Bera is an evil, war-mongering king who treats Abram underhandedly, Melchizedek is a righteous king of peace who graciously provides food and a blessing for Abram. Melchizedek is a paradigmatic non-Jew who recognizes the hand of God actively resting upon Abram. In return for this recognition, Melchizedek receives a tenth of the spoils, which is a blessing in turn from Abram. In a way this is an initial fulfillment of God’s

⁶ Wenham, 316.

⁷ Speiser, 105.

⁸ Wenham, 321.

⁹ Hebrews 7:1

promise to Abram that YHWH will bless those who bless Abram, and that through him all the nations of the earth will be blessed.¹⁰

Melchizedek in Psalm 110:

There is but one brief mention of Melchizedek in Psalm 110, and this mention has generated two widely divergent views on the issue. On one side, it is argued that the best translation of the passage is, “Yahweh has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest of the Eternal according to his pact; his legitimate king, my lord...’”¹¹ With this change, Psalm 110, which the majority of scholarship accepts as a coronation psalm, becomes disconnected from Israel’s history. However, this translation is a bit forced. Translating the passage to read “the Eternal” is fairly unfounded as the Hebrew text reads very naturally as “forever.” This understandably alters the impetus to read “melchi-zedek” as something other than a proper name. Even though “melchi-zedek” is used in a literary way to emphasize the translated meaning of “righteous king” in Genesis 14, it is still very much used as a proper name. Thus the allusion in Psalm 110 should be taken in the same way even if there is literary emphasis placed on the translation.

The second position on this issue argues that this is a coronation Psalm that founds the Davidic kingship in Jerusalem on the model of Melchizedek.¹² Thus, the Davidic kingship is being modeled after the Jebusite kingship, of which Melchizedek was an example, inherited by David when he captured Jerusalem,¹³ and which this Psalm bestows as a gift from God. This kingship model is a kingship that is also exercised as a priesthood of sorts, just as Melchizedek had been both priest and king. However, because of the presence of the Levitical priesthood, the

¹⁰ Genesis 12:3

¹¹ Dahood, Michael. *The Anchor Bible: Psalms 3, 101-150* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1970) 112.

¹² Allen, Leslie C. *Word Biblical Commentary Volume 21: Psalms 110-150* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983) 81.

¹³ Ibid, 87.

Davidic king-priest exercised priesthood only on special occasions or in extraordinary circumstances.¹⁴ This connection of the roles of king and priest within the Davidic monarchy is important due to the messianic significance of that monarchy. Further, Psalm 110 is widely accepted to be a Psalm of messianic promise.¹⁵ Thus, the righteous king of peace becomes the model for the Davidic monarchy and the promised Messiah that will come from that line.

Melchizedek in Hebrews:

In Hebrews 5-7, the author is concerned with showing Christ's supremacy in comparison with Israel's Levitical priesthood. In order to do this, he argues that Christ is a priest after the model of Melchizedek. "The appeal to Melchizedek, who, as the first priest mentioned in Scripture is the archetype of all priesthood, validates Jesus' priesthood as different from and superior to the Levitical priesthood."¹⁶ It is to this end that the author quotes Psalm 110 and references Genesis 14. In Hebrews 5:6 and 9-10, the author of Hebrews brings Melchizedek into the picture by calling upon the messianic promise of Psalm 110. In verse 6, the quotation of Psalm 110 serves to show that Christ did not aspire to and autonomously assume this priesthood, Rather, it was given to him by God.¹⁷ Verses 9-10 connect this priesthood directly to Christ's saving work.¹⁸ This is reiterated in 6:19-20, where Christ's saving work is again connected directly to his priestly status modeled on that of Melchizedek.

In chapter 7, the author turns to an explanation of this connection between Christ and Melchizedek. As has been said, the purpose is to show that Christ is superior to the Levitical priesthood. The author draws many correlations between the literary figure of Melchizedek and Christ to make this connection. However, it must be noted that the author is not comparing

¹⁴ Ibid, 82.

¹⁵ Ibid, 84.

¹⁶ Lane, William L. *Word Biblical Commentary Volume 47a: Hebrews 1-8* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1991) 123.

¹⁷ Ibid, 118.

¹⁸ Ibid, 122.

Melchizedek with the earthly Jesus, but with the eternal Son of God.¹⁹ This is important because it is the eternal nature of Melchizedek's priesthood that interests the author of Hebrews and it is this that he latches onto in comparison to Christ.²⁰ The author references the literary lack of genealogy, birth, and death of Melchizedek and compares it with Christ. One must say "literary lack" here because it is not to be doubted that Melchizedek, as a historic figure, had a genealogy, birth and death. However, because these are not included in the narrative, the literary character of Melchizedek provides for this kind of comparison to Christ.

With Christ and Melchizedek connected through their shared eternal natures and the messianic promise of Psalm 110, the author goes on to argue concerning why Melchizedek's priesthood is superior to the Levitical priesthood. This argument is based on a comparison between Melchizedek and Abram with Levi considered almost as a subset of Abram. The author argues that Abram, who has the exalted status of being the patriarch of all Israel, gave tribute to Melchizedek, thus recognizing Melchizedek as the greater of the two. Of course, the bit of narrative from Genesis 14 where Melchizedek gives food to Abram, which could read as Melchizedek giving tribute to Abram, is not brought up here in order to serve the author's literary intentions. Further, the author wonders why, if the Levitical priesthood had attained perfection, there would be a need for a messianic priest in the order of Melchizedek, as pointed to in Psalm 110. He concludes that there would be no such need if that were the case. Thus, because there is such a promise, the Levitical priesthood is inferior to that which is foretold by such a promise. This, the author argues, is realized in Christ.

Thus, the author of Hebrews makes the argument that Christ is a priest in the order of Melchizedek because of their shared eternal natures and the messianic promise of Psalm 110.

¹⁹ Koester, Craig R. *The Anchor Bible: Hebrews* (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 2001) 348.

²⁰ Lane, 167.

Further, he sees rightly that “[this] promise was fulfilled in Christ who *is* actually what Melchizedek *was* symbolically, an eternal priest who exercises his priestly prerogatives in a non-legal, universal ministration”²¹

Conclusion - Holding it All Together:

Throughout the biblical witness, the figure of Melchizedek serves a heavily literary function. In Genesis he is the righteous king of peace that recognizes God’s hand on Abram and is an example of the nations being blessed by God through Abram in fulfillment of God’s initial promise to Abram. All this is displayed in contrast to the evil, war-mongering king of Sodom who treats Abram in a somewhat underhanded manner. In Psalm 110, this character is called upon to provide the prerogative for the priestly function of the Davidic monarchy and the promised messiah that will come out of that line. In Hebrews, the author argues that Christ has fulfilled this role and that he is able to provide eternal salvation, which the Levitical priests could not, because of the connection between messiah and Melchizedek in Psalm 110. In this, it is plain to see how this idea develops throughout the biblical witness until it find fulfillment in Christ as explained by the author of the epistle to the Hebrews.

²¹ Ibid, 183.

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