

A Mysterious King and Kingly Meal

¹⁷ After his 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).

¹⁸ And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.)

¹⁹ And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth;

²⁰ and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

²¹ And the king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself."

²² But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth,

²³ that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.'

²⁴ I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me. Let Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre take their share."

Genesis 14:17-24

A Strange Scroll

I imagine it went something like this...

He was sitting together with his cousin under a rock, to keep the blazing hot sun off their bodies while he opened his sack to pull out lunch: a little **bread** and a canteen full of **wine**

(the water is too bad around here to drink). They broke bread together and, as it had so many times in recent days, their conversation returned to the **great war** which has only recently come to an end.

“So many of those people, gone—starved, tortured, and incinerated in a burnt offering—a ‘holocaust’ to the very devil himself. At least, that’s what they keep saying. Do you believe it, ed-Dib?”

“I don’t know what to think. It is all so remote from this boring life here in the desert.”

“Maybe, but now they are returning to *our* land, taking over *our* cities. There will be no end to it. I even hear that they are thinking of turning the whole land into a nation for them. **Wars will rage** anew, for those people are always **making war on everyone**. They are never satisfied.”

“I don’t know, Jum’a. It seems to me there is enough blame on both sides.” Suddenly, ed-Dib changed the subject. “Jum’a, do you hear that?”

“I hear nothing.”

“**Exactly.**” Just then, they both realized they had been so long engrossed in their discussion that their sheep had vanished.

“It is your turn,” whined Jum’a. “Besides, they are more your responsibility than mine. They belong to your uncle. I’m younger. And, I’m still eating.”

Ed-Dib did not complain. That was more Jum’a’s style. Besides, he always loved a new adventure, even if it was up here in one of the hottest, driest lands on earth. These rugged hills were always yielding **new treasure**, however small. It was just too bad that all that water down in the lake was **full of salt**. He might get a little thirsty on this afternoon.

Up and up ed-Dib climbed, all the while chasing what he thought were the remote sounds of his herd. Then at last, he came upon the main flock. “**30, 31, 32 ... Where is that last little runt? Always wondering off,**” he thought. Then he heard it, the sound of that last little sheep. It sounded like it had done the impossible—climbed around a tiny ledge and up a steep incline now out of site. All he could make out was a dark cave above him.

“**Maybe it got stuck up here?**” Just then, he threw a rock, hoping that when it landed, it would scare the dumb thing enough to scream so that he would know this is where it went. But instead of a loud bleat, there was thud and a crack. The rock didn’t hit solid ground or even the sheep. That was something else. That something broke.

He climbed around the precarious ledge, and up the incline to investigate. To ed-Dib's shock and amazement, he saw several large rooms full of caves with dozens and dozens of clay jars covered with dust and cobwebs. "These must have been here a very long time." He quickly turned to yell down to Jum'a who had finally caught up to the flock below.

Suddenly, ed-Dib stopped. His curiosity got the better of him. "Maybe I should open one of those jars first?" he said to himself. "Yes, that is what an adventurer would do. But which one? That one there, the thirteenth in the line. Lucky number 13." He walked gingerly over to the jar so as not to break anything. Then he blew on the lid and began to cough. Carefully now, he opened the top, looked inside, and saw to his amazement several scrolls with writing on them.

"Might as well take one out." To his astonishment, he saw that he could read it, though the dialect was different. And this is what it said:

"Its interpretation for the last days refers to the captives, who..." The paper was torn. The line, incomplete. "Just how long has this stuff been sitting here?"

He kept reading. He couldn't help himself. This was the discovery of a lifetime. "Whose teachers have been hidden and keep secret, and from the inheritance of Melchizedek, for

...” The line broke off again. “Who is Melchizedek,” he wondered to himself?

“... and they are the inheritance of Melchizedek, who will make them return. And liberty will be proclaimed for them, to free them from the debt of all their iniquities. And this will happen in the first week of the jubilee ... in which atonement shall be made for all the sons of light and for the men of the lot of Melchizedek. It is the time for the year of grace of Melchizedek, and of his armies, the nation of the holy ones of God, of the rule of judgment, as is written about him in the songs of David.”

“David?” he murmured. “The old Jewish king? Just what have I found here? Where was I, Oh yes...”

“It is the time for the year of grace of Melchizedek ... about whom in the songs of David it says: ‘Elohim will stand in the assembly of God, in the midst of the gods he judges’” [Ps 82:1]. To the heights, return. God will judge ... Its interpretation concerns Belial.”

“Belial?” he said rather loudly, so that it echoed off the cave walls. “The devil?” he said more quietly so as not to give away where he was to Jum’a.

“Its interpretation concerns Belial and the spirits of his lot, who ... turned aside from the commandments of God to commit evil. But, Melchizedek will carry out the vengeance

of God’s judgments, and on that day he will free them from the hand of Belial and from the hand of all the spirits of his lot. To his aid shall come all the gods of justice; and all the sons of God. This is the day of peace about which he said through the prophet Isaiah, ‘How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the angel who announces peace, the angel of good who announces salvation, saying to Zion: Your God Reigns’” [Isa 52:7].¹

Just then, Jum’a entered the cave, having heard his cousin’s loud voice.

“What is all this about the devil,” Jum’a said before suddenly looking around the cave. “What is this ed-Dib? What is this you have found?”

“You will no longer call me ed-Dib,” he proclaimed in a loud voice. “From now on I am Indie. Indiana Jones Muhammad, and this is my Treasure of the Lost Cave. Jum’a, we’re going to be rich!”

A Tale of Two Kings

“After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him” (Gen 14:17), Abram found himself in the company of two very different kings. The passage today deals with the events that transpire immediately

¹ This is taken from the Dead Sea Scroll 11Q13 col. ii:4-16 also labeled 11QMelchizedek.

after the Giant Wars. They take place in a place called the **Valley of Shaveh** also called the Valley of the Kings. Shaveh means “**to level, make even, smooth**” reminding me of the prophecy of Isaiah, “**Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth**” (**Isa 40:4 NKJV**). Dictionaries tell us that this was perhaps the Kidron Valley, the valley our Lord crossed on his way to the Garden on the night of his betrayal,² the valley Absalom set up a monument to himself (**2 Sam 18:18**), a monument that may still be there to this day.

This valley is just below the eastern walls of the glorious old city of Jerusalem. It was here, 4,000 years ago that a mysterious king named **Melchizedek** king of Salem came out to meet Abram, along with **Bera** king of Sodom after Abram’s great victory that set free Lot and his family—the captives of the powerful kings of the east. **Salem** is the older word for Jerusalem (**Ps 76:2**). It means “**peace**.” In those days, there would have been almost nothing around, save for a small settlement upon on the hill where this Melchizedek³ ruled over his territory in the land of Canaan. On the other hand, it would have been quite a trek for the king of Sodom to get

² Targum Neofiti calls it the “Valley of Gardens.”

³ Assuming that Melchizedek was king of the place called Salem rather than this being a word play on a title he holds; that is, he is the “King of Peace” from whereabouts unknown.

there, seeing that it is thousands of feet higher than the Dead Sea, and not a few miles away. Nothing more is said of Melchizedek here, not where he came from, not his lineage, nothing.

All we can speak of from the text is his name. Most people think **Melchizedek** means, “**King of Righteousness.**” But it can also mean “**My King is Righteous,**” or “**My God is Salvation.**” I’ll say more about this later. This King of Righteousness is accompanied by a man we saw last time. **Bera** means **Son of Evil**, but it can also mean “**Gift.**” Both may be relevant to the story. Thus, we have the Evil king meeting up with the Righteous King with Abram—this up and coming new warrior in the land—between them. What will become of their time together?

In the story, the **king of Sodom arrives first**. It says that he went out to meet with Abram. Why? Did he come bearing gifts? No. It was because Abram had recaptured one of Sodom’s lost sons. Lot had moved to Sodom and taken up residence there. Perhaps, the king is coming to greet as well as gather intelligence on this new powerful lord in the region. Keep your friends close. Keep your enemies closer. We learn nothing more about their exchange before Melchizedek enters the picture.

The King of Righteousness

The Covenant Meal

It says that Melchizedek also came out to meet him. It says that he “brought out bread and wine” (Gen 14:18). Melchizedek did come bearing gifts. The gift of hospitality, nourishment, and peace. This is the first instance of these two elements coming together in the Scriptures, but it is by no means the last, the most obvious being the Lord’s Supper which was taken from the Passover celebration which itself used bread and wine.

The context of this meal is significant. It comes on the heels of a mighty military victory. It is a victory meal, and Melchizedek has received the Good News, the gospel, that Abram has won. Then it says Melchizedek was priest of El Elyon (“God Most High”). Both of these combine to form a picture, as one commentator says, “In which the secular and the sacred are still not separated.”⁴

The secular is a view of Abram, the exhausted liberator receiving a fellowship meal from a king. Is this not what bread and wine are for? A morsel of bread brings refreshment (Gen 18:5). A little wine makes the heart glad (Ps 104:15; Ecc 10:19). Give us this day our daily bread. Abram is in need of

⁴ Claus Westermann, *A Continental Commentary: Genesis 12–36* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 205.

such sustenance, but did he think a king would arrive to provide it?

But the military and priestly context also tells about something **sacred**. You see, when kings gathered together after war, and especially around a meal, they often did so to make a covenant with one another. From as diverse of traditions as Rome to the Reformation, theologians believe that that this is a **covenant meal**. Michael Horton writes, “**After Abram’s battle with God’s enemies, he is treated to a covenantal meal of bread and wine with the mysterious Melchizedek.**”⁵

Thus, for example, we find **Jacob and Laban** eating together making a covenant under a pillar of stones (**Gen 31:44-46**). We see the **Gibeonites** coming to Joshua under false pretenses. They bring out bread and wine and after three days make a covenant (**Josh 9:12-16**). We even see God himself renewing his covenant on Mt. Sinai with the seventy

⁵ Michael Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life: Being Good News People in a Bad News World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 232–233. Also, “Vawter has suggested that this remark shows that Melchizedek and Abram had a covenant meal together.” Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 316; “Bread and Wine: The elements of a celebratory meal. These may have been communion portions of a thanksgiving sacrifice offered to God after a successful campaign (14:17), or they may suggest that a covenant is forged between Abraham and Melchizedek and is sealed with a sacred meal (cf. 31:44–46; Josh 9:14–15).” Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, *Genesis: With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes*, ed. Revised Standard Version and Second Catholic Edition, The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 36.

elders and all the people. And they “beheld God, and ate and drank” (Exod. 24:8-11). Then, of course, Jesus takes up the cup and says, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). And the disciples ate bread and drank wine with the Lord. Thus, the picture we get of Melchizedek bring bread and wine to Abram is a shadowy prefiguring of the Lord’s Supper.

This is confirmed by the fact that it says Melchizedek is not only “king” but “priest.” For the priest was here interceding on behalf of Abram for “God Most High.” The name for God here is El Elyon. It is the first time it has been used in the Bible. It is a curious name in that it is found in only two other passages in the books of Moses. One is on the lips of Balaam (Num 24:16). The other is in Deuteronomy 32:8 and the allotting of the nations to the sons of God verse.

To put that another way, Elyon is a name given to God by non-Abrahamic peoples—the nations or those who would later be called Gentiles. Elyon is a Gentile name for the Highest God, and was even used along with “El” at Ugarit (though El and Elyon are not used together at Ugarit). This fits, because Melchizedek is a king in the middle of Canaan. Nevertheless, it becomes a name used positively in the Bible for God, because the Jews certainly believed that Yahweh was the Highest being in the universe, the only uncreated, all-

powerful, all-knowing God there is. In fact in a moment, Abram will call God Yahweh El Elyon.

A Blessing

The passage says next that as they were eating bread and drinking wine that Melchizedek blessed Abram saying, “Blessed be Abram by El Elyon, Possessor of heaven and earth” (Gen 14:19). Now, a blessing in the Bible is generally the bestowal of some gift upon a person. That gift can be temporal or spiritual. Or, it can be the bestowal of goodness or favor. In this case, the blessing is serving the larger context of the whole Abram narrative going back to Gen 12:3 where God said, “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

There are two fascinating parallels with Melchizedek here. **First**, God said that he would bless any who bless Abram. Melchizedek is the first person to bless Abram. In a moment, Abram will actually give Melchizedek a tenth of all he has. So both men get blessed, not just because of the blessing of Melchizedek or the victorious battle of Abram, but because of the covenantal promise of God when he called Abram many years earlier.

Second, Melchizedek is living among the nations. He is not related to Abram biologically. One might say that he is

one of the families of the earth. Thus, R. Kent Hughes rightly says, “This was the initial fulfillment of that promise [Gen 12:3], as Melchizedek, one of the families of the earth blessed Abram.”⁶

Because Melchizedek is not grounding his blessing in Baal or the moon god Nanna or some other usurper to the throne, but rather God Most High, “Possessor of heaven and earth,” the ground of the blessing is solid and firm. For Elyon is the ultimate Power in the universe. As Hughes again writes, “God’s cosmic power is the ultimate ground of faith.” Both Melchizedek and Abram are justified in believing in and serving *this* God, because this God alone is Most High of heaven and earth.

From here, Melchizedek moves his blessing to El Elyon—God Most High. “Blessed be Elyon, who has delivered your enemies into your hand” (Gen 14:20). This is the second time someone has blessed the LORD in Genesis. Noah blessed the LORD back in Gen 9:26, after he swore to give a mighty covenant blessing to Shem. It is curious that some have thought that Melchizedek actually *is* Shem, I’ll return to that a bit later.

⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 211.

This is an important acknowledgement by the Priest-King of Jerusalem that **God is the one who won the battle for Abram**. God is the great deliverer. God is the true Power of heaven. Therefore, he must be worshiped. For, when blessing is given in the Bible towards God, the term implies adoration and worship. Thus, we return to the idea of a covenant meal, but now, not just between two kings, but between three—Melchizedek, Abram, and Elyon. God stands as a witness between the two men. God is the ground of their covenant and friendship. God is the ground of Abram’s victory.

A Tithe

Next we come to the response of Abram. It says, “**And Abram gave him a tenth of everything**” (**Gen 14:20**). “Tenth” is the word *ma’aser*, and it means “**tithe**.” It is used only here in Genesis, but it is found throughout the books of Moses. For example, “**Every tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD’s; it is holy to the LORD**” (**Lev 27:30**). “**To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting**” (**Num 18:21**). “**So you [Levites] shall also present a contribution to the LORD from all your tithes, which you receive from the people of Israel**” (**18:28**).

A “tithe” is defined as, “The religious act of giving a tenth for the support of a religious purpose.”⁷ But it is more than that. The tithe is what the person being tithed to is owed. It is their right. Jacob promises God that he will bless him that, “Of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you” (28:18).

Churches of the Reformation and other traditions have long called the part of the service where we give back to God the “Tithes and Offerings.” But this term “tithe” is not popular today because to some it smacks of legalism and OT Mosaic law. But, they say, we are not under law today, but under grace. Therefore, we should never call what people give today a tithe. For a tithe was something God demanded then, but today he demands only that we give from the heart.

I’ve had people come up to me rather upset that I would pray for the “tithes” and offerings in our church. I had a professor in Seminary tell us that the NT principle is really that we should be giving much more than a tenth, such as the church in Acts that that sold their possessions and belongings and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need (Acts 2:44), or perhaps the widow who gave her two small copper coins, but it was all she owned (Luke 21:2-4). This is not the

⁷ J. Christian Wilson, “Tithe,” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 578.

place to get into a lengthy discussion of the relationship of OT law to the NT or of the differences between covenant theology and other systems that see less continuity between the Testaments.

What I simply want you to note here is that both Jacob and Abram are living hundreds of years *before Moses* ever went up Mt. Sinai to receive the law. In other words, the principle of the tithe was around long before God gave Israel its legal covenant.⁸ It therefore *transcends the Mosaic law*. This is just like the moral commandments that did not arise out of nowhere on Mt. Sinai, but have been around since the beginning. Tithing is, in fact, a moral principle, not a purely legal one, which is why Malachi says that the people were “robbing” God of his tithes (*Mal 3:8*).

Tithes were given to the sanctuaries or the kings, and Melchizedek counts towards both. But curiously, Abram is the one who has won the war. Melchizedek didn't do anything to help. It is presupposed that to the victor go the

⁸ **GOING DEEPER:** We see it in a fascinating way long before Moses, in *Jubilees 10:9* when God told the angels to bind all of the evil demonic giant spirits in hell for their rebellion, but Mastema (Satan), said that if God did that, he wouldn't be able to carry out his work on earth. So it says, “*Let the tenth part of them remain before [Mastema], and let nine parts descend into the place of condemnation.*” Satan is left a tithe of the demons by the LORD. We may also see it in the symbolic use of the number “10” in *Genesis 8:5* when the ark lands on the “tenth” month on the “tenth” day. Noah and all the animals become a tithe of mankind which has perish on the earth.

spoils.⁹ So why does Abram do this? There is more than one answer to this question.

First, and most basically, Melchizedek is **king**. As king, he has a right to the tithe. But more than this, Melchizedek has just given Abram his blessing. Abram is now in his territory and is benefiting from their new allegiance, so this is a fitting response in the presence of a great king. Abram does not give Melchizedek anything begrudgingly, but out of gratitude, humility, and subordination. **Second**, Melchizedek is a **priest**, and priests receive the tithes too. So this only adds to the fitting response. **Third**, Abram is setting an **example** for all of his posterity to follow, though he may not even realize he is doing that yet. **Fourth**, we have the contrast of this Melchizedek-Abram scene with the re-emergence of the evil king of **Sodom**. **Fifth**, we need to move **beyond the Genesis account** to think about who Melchizedek is or at least who he represents. When we understand this, then we will truly be able to see why Abram gave him a tithe of the spoils. Let's look at the kind of Sodom first.

An Evil King vs. a Righteous King

As soon as Abram gives Melchizedek a tithe, the king of Sodom returns to the story. Where Melchizedek is kind, Bera is mean. Where Melchizedek came with hands full ready to

⁹ Wenham, 317.

give, the King of Gifts came empty handed. Rather than blessing words, there are short, curt words. Rather than a fellowship-covenant meal, there is a demand. “Give me the persons, but take the good for yourself” (Gen 14:21). The courtesy of his majesty is somewhat lessened of late. The Son of Evil wants Lot back, as well as all of the people who were stolen. Sort of sounds like another evil lord who appears on pages throughout the Bible. Is there some kind of slavery going on? Does the king of Sodom have a right to these people? Does he not care that the only reason Abram went after these people is because they were his relatives? Does he know who actually fought for Abram? Does he realize what he is asking for?

“But Abram said to the king of Sodom, ‘I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, “I have made Abram rich.” I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me. Let Aner, Eschol, and Mamre take their share’” (Gen 14:22-24).

Abram’s response is fascinating. His answer seems to turn the tables and recognizes something that is going on unsaid by this evil king. Bera wants something much more than people

or booty. **He wants Abram's allegiance.** He wants his loyalty. Perhaps he even wants his worship.

By saying that he would not take a thread or a sandal strap that is Bera's, that Bera can actually keep it all himself, Abram is acknowledging that, again, because he is king like Melchizedek, Bera has a some right to the spoils. But he makes a solemn vow, **an oath before God** himself by raising up his hand before Yahweh El Elyon (22), and swears he is not interested in keeping for himself even the smallest items of booty, let alone anything of value.¹⁰ **Abram was not in this for the money!**

But it is more than this. He does not want the king of Sodom to say that he **made Abram rich** (23). If he did this, then he would be beholding to Bera. He would be a kind of servant or slave to this king, and would be putting himself under the Son of Evil's rule. But one cannot serve both the King of Righteousness and the Son of Evil. Abram is a free man, and he has chosen to worship the LORD ... because the LORD has chosen him and would not let go, even though his stupidity in Egypt.

All Abram demands, and I think it is a demand that is his by right because he, after all, won the war—all he demands is

¹⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 318.

that **his men** who fought bravely bringing Lot and his family back safely **be allowed their share of the spoils** (24). Then he demands that **Aner, Eschol, and Mamre** take their share too. For you see, Abram is only living in this land as a **sojourner** among those who have made it their permanent home. He is in their lands. He has made agreements with them, and so he gives them what rightfully belongs to them, which is the whole point of the tithe with Melchizedek, and essentially the equivalent here too. Abram knows that the LORD has provided for him, and will provide for him. He is, after all, the man of faith, and his actions here—from his **selflessness**, to his **generosity**, to his **humility** and **willingness to give** what rightfully belongs to the kings in the form of the spoils and tithes of war are timeless actions that all the children of Abram—especially Christians, should emulate with joyful hearts for the salvation that the King of kings has given to them, in setting them free from the hostile enemies of sin, death, and the devil.

Who is this King of Righteousness?

This leads me to the fifth reason why Abram tithed to Melchizedek. To discover this, we need to go outside of Genesis to the book of Hebrews. Hebrews has much to say about Melchizedek, as did many other Jews during the time that Herod's second temple stood in Jerusalem. The main

section I want to look at is **Hebrews 7:1-10**. It describes the scene that we have been discussing (1). Then it brings up this title (**vs. 2 ff**). The purpose of doing this is to explain **how Jesus can be a high priest**, obeying Levitical law, even though he is not descended from Levi. Melchizedek becomes, at the least, **a type** of the priesthood that Christ will assume, as the Psalm (the only other place in the Bible that talks about Melchizedek) says, **“I have made you a priest after the order of Melchizedek”** (**Ps 110:4**). This Psalm is also important to look at.

David overhears a conversation (**vs. 1**). “Yahweh” speaks to “Adonai”—**“the LORD speaks to my lord.”** Adonai is king David’s Lord. Let that fact sink in. The king has a Lord. Yahweh is Adonai’s Lord. This is classic **Two-Powers in heaven** theology, that the NT rightly applies to Jesus (**Matt 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42; Acts 2:34-35; Heb 1:13**). There are two Gods here (two persons I mean), and both are the One True God. The Father swears that he will give to the Son a great kingdom and that he will rule over all his enemies. People will offer themselves freely on the day of his power, even as Abram has done for Melchizedek, because **“The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You [Adonai] are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.’”** And thus, the Psalm speaks of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews now takes this and begins talking about Melchizedek in some very strange ways. First, it takes his name and the name “Salem” and makes a theological observation. “He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness.” Then it remembers that Salem means peace, so he is the “king of peace” (Heb 7:2). Of course, righteousness and peace are associated with the Messiah (Isa 9:7). This is not a coincidence.

The next verse says, “He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but [“made like” or “similar to” or “as a copy of”] the Son of God he continues a priest forever”¹¹ (Heb 7:3). This is incredibly strange language if you aren’t familiar with the extra-biblical traditions. About this verse, let me say first that I do not believe that Hebrews is simply using an argument from silence to make its point.¹² That is, He is not saying that Genesis nowhere gives us Melchizedek’s lineage, therefore he

¹¹ The unique word *aphomoioō*, used only here, can mean any of these, and yes, they certainly have different nuances. See Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 198.

¹² Calvin writes on why Melchizedek is not Shem (see below), “Whoever he was, is presented before us, without any origin, as if he had dropped from the clouds [ironic language, indeed, given that Calvin thinks there is nothing unusual about this person], and that his name is buried without any mention of his death.” Thus, Calvin, like many today, is obviously fine with this sort of argument from silence. But this is unbecoming of an often fine exegete. For if I can make arguments from silence, I can make the Bible say just about anything I want it to say.

is like Christ. What kind of an argument would that even be? You are going to root one of the most important doctrines in the whole Bible, the priesthood of Christ which allows him to die for our sin on something that *isn't* in the text, namely, a record of Melchizedek's past? In fact, that doesn't even make sense as a comparison, given that Jesus has a mother! Rather, the author goes much further than saying we don't have a record of his father or mother. He says this man was not born and did not die!

It seems to get this from the rich [extra-biblical traditions](#) that sprung up around Melchizedek in Judaism. What are these traditions? There are several, but I'll name a couple here. First, the Targum has an old tradition that [Melchizedek is Shem](#), the son of Noah. There are several reasons for this speculation,¹³ but I think at the end of the day, the Shem hypothesis does not really work. The other main idea is one I presented this morning in the form of my story of the two men who discovered the Dead Sea Scrolls back in 1946.

The Scrolls have this fascinating idea that Melchizedek—and scholars are divided on this—is either an [angel](#) or [another name for Yahweh](#). Logically, this does not have to be an either/or, given that throughout the OT, Yahweh has an

¹³ See Emmanouela Grypeous; Helen Spurling, *The Book of Genesis in Late Antiquity: Encounters Between Jewish and Christian Exegesis* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2013), 228ff.

angel that bears his very name and essence—the Angel of the LORD.¹⁴ In the scroll, Melchizedek is one who will judge Belial, that is the devil. He is the one spoken to in Psalm 82. Melchizedek is the one who will free the captives of Belial and all his evil demons. He is the one of whom Isaiah speaks concerning “the angel of good who announces salvation, saying to Zion: Your God Reigns.”

Now, I’m fine with the idea that Melchizedek may just be a plain old ordinary guy who becomes a type of Christ, just like many ordinary men in the OT become pictures of Christ. But for fun (and for the sake of a preaching point), let me follow this trail further. Let us say that the Scroll is right for sake of argument. What would that mean?

First, it at least makes sense of how it would say that this person had no beginning or end. **Second**, the idea that he is somehow a copy of the “son of God” would be a lot like Christ in the NT being the “image” of God. **Third**, it explains better than the ordinary way why Hebrews would tell us that Melchizedek is Abram’s superior. “See how great this man¹⁵ was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils” (**Heb 7:4**). “The inferior is blessed by the superior” (6).

¹⁴ An excellent article on this is Rick Van de Water, “Michael or Yhwh? Toward Identifying Melchizedek in 11Q13,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 16 (2006): 75-86.

¹⁵ Angels are called “men” in the Bible, so this is not a hindrance to the supernatural view of the Scrolls.

Remember that only God has blessed Abram, until Melchizedek does it in Genesis. Fourth, it makes sense of a very strange word in Hebrews 7:8. “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.” Vv 5-6 have made the point that the Levites received tithes from their brothers. So vs. 8 calls the Levites “mortal men.” But isn’t that a bit obvious that they are mortal? Isn’t everyone here mortal? Isn’t Melchizedek, because he is just a man? What a strange word? But, it fits with his assertion that he is without end of life.

If Hebrews is doing what I think it may be doing, it is actually hinting that Christ’s priesthood comes from Melchizedek, not merely by analogy, but by **ontology**. That is, Christ *is* Melchizedek. That is how he can be a priest in his order. In this sense, Melchizedek would not be a proper name so much as a title. He is the King of Righteousness and the King of Peace. What is peace in the Bible? It is friendship with God. How does a person have peace with God? Through the only mediator, the Son of God.

While having a few problems (mostly that it is speculative), I cannot think of anything in this interpretation that contradicts the Bible. But for my purposes here, it shows us in vivid detail why Melchizedek has a covenant meal of

bread and wine with Abram, why he blesses Abram, why he blesses the Most High, why he is so sharply contrasted with the king of Sodom, and why Abram gives him a tithe of everything. It does it even more than a type or picture would. It is because Abram is actually meeting with Christ—the Angel of the LORD, whom he will meet again in the next chapter.

Calvin called this person, “that Melchizedek, the chief father of the Church.” He said that, “Amid the corruptions of the world, he alone, in that land, was an upright and sincere cultivator and guardian of religion.”¹⁶ Calvin did not take this interpretation, but it is certainly true of this interpretation as well as the more ordinary one. Perhaps even more true. And it makes sense of why the Psalm would ascribe to the incarnated Messiah the lineage of a priesthood that is otherwise so obscure.

Whatever you make of him, let me close with a few more thoughts from the scrolls by returning to Jum’a and his cousin en-Dib (which were the real names of the men who discovered the Scrolls). These two men were almost certainly Muslims—Gentiles. Imagine that my story really happened. Imaging that these Muslims read in that cave from this text

¹⁶ John Calvin and John King, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 388.

on Melchizedek. This mighty priest would one day return to destroy Belial, the devil, and bind all the spirits that he uses to do his bidding. This mighty king would be aided by the very sons of God from heaven itself in carrying out judgment upon the wicked, while himself proclaiming liberty and setting free all those who were debtors to sin and slaves to Belial by birth. Thus, he would usher in great peace between men and God.

Well, the story of the NT is that **this has happened** in the person of Jesus Christ. He has come to proclaim liberty to the captives, to set the prisoners free. He has done what Abram did, and what God did for Abram. He has done what they believed Melchizedek would do. He has done it by being the great high priest who died for our sins, and now lives to make intercession for us in the heavenly temple where his once-for-all sacrifice is an eternally pleasing aroma in the sight of God.

Perhaps if someone had told Jum'a and en-Dib about this Messiah, they would have repented of their sins. Who knows? Perhaps someone did. Whatever their fate, this message is proclaimed to you today. **Melchizedek has returned (either figuratively or literally) in the incarnated flesh of the God-man Jesus Christ.** Believe upon him today. Trust him by faith alone. Enter into his gracious covenant. Be baptized into his Name. Partake of his covenant meal. Share in the spoils of his war. Be blessed in the blessing of Abram. Know the

forgiveness of sin. Demonstrate your fealty to him by giving back to him what rightfully belongs to him out of humble thankfulness for his kindness. And look forward to life eternal with the King of Righteousness, the King who is Righteousness, and the King of Peace.