

MELCHIZEDEK – NOT REALLY A MYSTERY

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The Biblical figure of Melchizedek is mentioned from time to time in our churches. We know that not much is given to us about him in the Bible - unfortunately, because the little there is seems to indicate a figure of importance. He is often mentioned from the pulpits as a type of Christ (and we're not questioning that). Some preachers even go as far as saying he was a manifest appearance of Christ. Mostly, however, he is mentioned in "offering teachings" where it is underlined that Abraham gave him a tenth (or tithe) of everything – tithing, therefore came before the Law. As a rule the preachers omit to note that it was a tenth of the plunder of war and not of Abraham's personal wealth. They conveniently also do not note that he returned the rest to the king of Sodom!

To understand the figure of Melchizedek we need to do three important things:

- Consider the whole context of each of the instances in which he is mentioned in the Bible.
- Research the ancient writings of the Hebrews, in order to test the "general knowledge" of that time for an explanation.
- Study and understand the letter to the Hebrews as a single unit, and not as bits and pieces.

One thing we should not do:

- To fall into spiritual philosophising and add content far above that which was written in order to create an explanation. Sadly this is exactly what so often happens.

We first read of Melchizedek in **Genesis 14:18-20** after Abram (his name had not yet been changed) had rescued Lot from the kings who took him and his possessions. Melchizedek is mentioned as king of Salem and priest to God. He brought out bread and wine, and blessed Abram.

A thousand years later, the Psalmist mentions him again in **Psalms 110:4** - the Messianic Psalm that speaks of a priestly king like Melchizedek (or, as the KJV reads, after the order of Melchizedek - which simply means 'in like manner' or 'after the pattern of').

Another thousand years pass before we read again of Melchizedek in **Hebrews 7**. Once again he is called the king of Salem (or king of peace), and priest of the Most High God. It is also explained that his name means king of righteousness.

- Salem refers to what later becomes Jerusalem. The city was not built by the Hebrews, and they also did not give the city its name. It was a Jebusite city before David captured it (2 Sam. 5:6). The original name was most likely Urusalimum or Ursalimmu. It meant 'Foundation of Shalem', which was a known Ugaritic god. The name was probably only Hebraized because it seemed to mean 'Rain of Peace'. In other words, the Hebrews seemingly did not rename the city when they had the chance, perhaps because it was easily transliterated into something very Hebrew (www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Jerusalem.html). The root word of *shalem* indicates a completeness or wholeness.

My research took me once again to the ancient Jewish writings and I was informed that, according to the ancient Jewish sages (or wise men and teachers), Melchizedek was none other than Shem, the eldest son of Noah. Now, wait a minute, you might be saying, Shem was born centuries before Abraham! And you would be right too! Abraham is, in fact, the ninth generation of Shem's lineage (Gen. 11). But, we tend to forget that Shem lived to the age of 600 years while Abraham died at 175. If we calculate the time periods according to the genealogy in Genesis 11, Shem would have been approximately 390 years old at Abraham's birth. He would then not only have lived in Abraham's lifetime, but also outlived Abraham to see the 11th generation of his descendants - Jacob!

Shem is called the father of all the children of Eber, who was his great-grandson and from whom the name of the Hebrews came forth. History shows that Shem and his descendants settled in the area north of the Persian Gulf, which would place him in the correct geographical area for the meeting with Abraham in Gen. 14. In Noah's curse upon Canaan, son of Ham, he pronounced that Canaan would be Shem's slave - once again confirmation of the geographical setting. According to oral tradition as well as ancient writings of the Hebrews, Shem became known in that area as *Malkitzedek*, the "Righteous King", who brought burnt offerings to Yahweh. He was regarded as a prophet who served God as priest.

Heb. 7:11 describes Noah as an heir of righteousness. In His covenantal command to Noah after the flood, God instructed him and his sons to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth. This circumstantial evidence also provides credibility to the explanation that Melchizedek was Shem. He was the physiological beginning of the Messianic bloodline. With his great-grandson Eber, he taught the people about God and so spread the faith in Him through a school that became known as the Academy of Shem and Eber.

Let us now consider Heb. 7: 1, 2 & 3.

"For this Melchizedek – King of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham and blessed him as he returned from defeating the kings, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything; first, his name means 'king of righteousness,' then also, 'king of Salem', meaning 'king of peace'. Without father, mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God – remains a priest forever".

No genealogy is given in the Bible for Melchizedek. Bear in mind when reading this description in the letter to the Hebrews, that lineage was highly regarded in the Hebrew culture. An individual's esteem was determined to large extent by who his ancestors were. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews would then be correct in his statement that Melchizedek was not a descendent of Abraham and that he was Abraham's superior. Abraham was his descendent and it would be correct within that culture for Melchizedek to bless him, and not the other way around. It is also correct that Shem was not a priestly appointment by human decision or by Levitical lineage. He Levites only came later and from Shem's lineage.

Whereas the priests descended from the lineage of Abraham, he did not. Tithes of the Israelites' produce were brought to the Levites (Abraham's lineage) and yet Shem (or Melchizedek) received a tithe of the plunder from Abraham. This is no biblical basis for the manipulative tithe-teachings we experience in many churches and by televangelists.

History and ancient Jewish writings, long before the influence of Greek philosophy could pollute the knowledge, therefore point strongly to a non-mysterious biblical explanation for the figure and mention of Melchizedek in the Scriptures.

I have often wondered: did Abraham learn of the living God at Shem's feet, and is that why he so readily recognised that living God's voice when called by him? The answer came recently when I was glancing through the ancient Book of Jasher (mentioned in Joshua 10:13 and 2 Sam 1:18). Chapter 9 notes that Abram went to Noah and Shem at the age of ten, where he remained for 39 years and was taught the ways of the Lord.

Shem, as we noted, means Name. God is also called HaShem, or The Name, within Judaism.

Some last thoughts

The way in which the person and presence of Melchizedek are taken out of the written context in the church environment, and are presented in a loose topical fashion, is a classical example of the damage that theology and proof texting have done to the understanding of the Scriptures. The

letter to the Hebrews is essentially a letter about faith that is served by a New High Priest in a new (permanent) covenant that is rooted in a Single Sacrifice, once for all. The essence of the New High Priest is explained by a twofold comparison (a classical teaching method of the time):

- Priesthood under the Law lies in the human factor – it flows forth out of the Levitical lineage and is therefore carried over from out of the human factor.
- Priesthood that originates directly from God. The only known example from the Hebrew Scriptures is used, which is that of Melchizedek. The New High Priest is of the Father and not of human descent. The very expression “of the order of” means “after the pattern of” – therefore from God as opposed “the order of Aaron”, which is the human order or pattern.

Conclusion

Based on the available knowledge provided by the Hebrew cultural environment, the explanation of Melchizedek being Noah’s eldest son, Shem, is the most credible that we have been able to find. We see overwhelming reasons to accept this view. “Melchizedek” should also be understood as descriptive of a status and not as a personal name. The ancient writings show that *Malkitzedek* stood in high esteem among the people, and now the writer of the letter to the Hebrews describes the Christ on an even higher level.

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