

THE MELCHIZEDEK CITATIONS IN THE LETTER TO THE HEBREWS

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Genesis 14 is one of the most tantalising and mysterious passages in the history of the Patriarchs. Here is an incident in the life of Abraham which mentions four important kings by name, kings who must have been international figures in their time, yet they, and consequently the whole incident, cannot be identified or placed precisely in ancient history. Sufficient to say that it probably took place in the mid-eighteenth century B.C., in which time it fits well. So we see that Melchizedek cannot be 'pinned down' in history. His name, meaning 'King of Righteousness' or 'Righteousness is my King', is of a form common at the period in Syria and Palestine. His position as priest and king is also not unusual. Salem, his domain, is generally identified with Jerusalem, although there can be no certainty about this. It is quite probable, since Jerusalem has good communication with the Dead Sea plain.

Melchizedek appears abruptly, with the simple introduction, 'King of Salem, priest of the Most High God', and, after blessing Abram and receiving his tithe, is 'seen and heard no more'. Within these three verses we learn that Melchizedek was (i) King of Salem, and named without the genealogy customary with kings; (ii) Priest of the Most High God; (iii) respected by Abram to the extent of his giving him a tithe. Melchizedek's action in bringing bread and wine to the victorious Abram is the action of a priest, demonstrating the favour of his God, by offering tokens of fellowship (the sharing of bread and wine is a feature of the making of a covenant). It is interesting to note in passing that the Deity, whom Melchizedek served, is known from extra-Biblical sources by this same title, 'Creator of heaven and earth' (Phoenician, Ugaritic).

Psalms 110, a psalm ascribed to David, although most writers prefer a later date, resumes the theme of Melchizedek. Apparently speaking of the Messiah, it states, 'The Lord has sworn, and He will not change His mind, Thou art a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek'. No indication is given of the meaning of this title, although it fairly clearly implies a priesthood disparate from the Levitical. We should note especially the words 'for ever', which can only be based upon the fact that Melchizedek is given no genealogy in Genesis, and so lives on, an explanation more explicit in Hebrews. This is, strictly, illogical, since eleven other important men are also mentioned without genealogy.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews picks up Melchizedek in the course of his demonstration that Jesus Christ fulfils, and more than fulfils, the whole of Messianic prediction, especially as a Priest. The figure of Melchizedek is first introduced in quotation of Psalm 110 to legitimize Christ's Priesthood as appointed by God, apart from the traditional line, and this is repeated in 5: 10 and 6: 20 where Jesus has entered the Holiest place, into the very presence of God. Since He is a priest—a priest of Melchizedek's order—7 is largely concerned with a Christological com-

mentary and interpretation based upon the story of Abram and Melchizedek in Genesis 14. Heb. 7: 1-3 contain a repetition of the Genesis passage with brief interpretation of the statements concerning Melchizedek, thus the meaning of his name is given, and the fact that he has no genealogy is emphasised to the extent of saying that he is immortal. The next six verses contain a sort of homily upon the person of Melchizedek, showing his superiority to Abram, in the fact that the Patriarch himself paid tithes to the Priest. From this is also deduced the fact that his priesthood was superior to the Levitical, since 'One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him' (7: 9, 10). The following group of verses point out that the Levitical priesthood was but transient and again justifies the priesthood of the Lord, a descendant of the tribe of Judah, on the basis of Melchizedek's priesthood, who was neither a Levite nor yet a Hebrew, but acceptable to God nevertheless. Finally, the writer quotes from Psalm 110, assuring his readers that God has sworn an oath establishing Jesus in this priestly office. This office is permanent and filled by One Who has made a single, sufficient sacrifice and 'Consequently is able, for all time, to save those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them'.

The figure of Melchizedek in Genesis 14 and in Psalm 110 is used in the Epistle to the Hebrews as a prototype and precedent for the priestly office of Jesus, which the writer wishes to establish as legitimate. The words of the Psalm are naturally applicable to Him and, while we may consider some of the deductions from the Genesis passage rather far-fetched, we cannot say that they exceed the possible limits of Scriptural interpretation: there is a certain logic in their development.

If we cease from analytical examination of these chapters of Hebrews and read them as a whole, we, too, can say, both of Melchizedek, and of the 'great David's greater Son', 'See how great He is'.

THE INTERPRETATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT, AND INTERPRETATION TODAY

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1. In the previous papers we have examined the use of the Old Testament in Hebrews and in Paul. But in doing so, we have taken only a partial survey, for as well as being selective in what books we have chosen to examine, we have discussed only those cases in which there was an explicit quotation of the O.T. text. It must be emphasized that as well as these there are innumerable allusions to the O.T., many individual and distinctive words which are taken over, and themes which are often woven through the New Testament writings (such as Exodus, Inheritance etc.). When one takes all these into account, it will be seen that the N.T. is filled with references to the O.T.; these writers lived in the O.T.—for