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MELCHIZEDEK

A Minor Character of Great Importance to Biblical Theology

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Gaps in narratives arouse the curiosity of readers. Those perusing the Gospels, for example, may wonder: what happened to Jesus after the stories of his infancy? What did he do for a good part of his adolescent and young adult life? The lacuna in the canonical Gospels has provoked fertile imaginations to create stories about the so-called "hidden life" of Jesus, with some of the more fantastic ones having been preserved in the apocryphal gospels that were widely circulated up until the medieval period.

The sudden appearance of the mysterious character of Melchizedek in Gen. 14:18–20 has likewise elicited a lot of questions about his origin, identity, role in the Abram saga, and the enigmatic mention of his name in one of the royal psalms. The search for answers to these inquiries even resulted in the creation of a number of Melchizedek myths, legends, typologies, and *midrashim* during the Second Temple period (516 BCE–70 CE) and beyond, of which some may have contributed to the understanding of the priesthood of Jesus Christ in the Letter to the Hebrews.

This article thus aims to retrace the development of the Melchizedek traditions in order to understand how this minor character in the Bible gradually attained prominence in the articulation of the theology of the

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priesthood of Jesus Christ. Given the limits of a journal essay, however, it would not be possible to present a comprehensive survey of the scholarly works that have been done on this subject. What we intend to do, rather, is focus mainly on some of the influential works of the past as well as on major researches that have been done in recent years.

1. Genesis 14

Genesis 14 is so atypical and different from the rest of the patriarchal narratives that it is generally regarded as a scribal insertion within the Abraham cycle of stories. A plethora of opinions has arisen, however, regarding the origin and purpose of the traditions that are embedded in the chapter.

The tradition of Abram as a warrior (Gen. 14:1–17, 21–24). An alliance of four kings—Amraphel of Shinar, Arioch of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer of Elam, and Tidal of Goiim—defeated the rulers of the Jordan plain who had rebelled against their overlord. The allied forces captured the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, including Abram's nephew Lot, and plundered the goods and provisions of the cities. When word reached Abram, however, he led forth a rescue operation with 318 of his trained servants and routed King Chedorlaomer and his forces. Abram thus rescued his nephew and the captives and recovered all the plundered goods. On his return from battle, moreover, the king of Sodom went out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh and told him that he could keep the booty but that the rescued people should be allowed return to their city. Abram, however, restored to the king all the goods that belonged to his city, save for some shares of those who joined Abram in battle.

Various scholars in the 19th century tried to identify the four kings mentioned in v. 1 with rulers in the Assyrian and Babylonian annals of the second millennium BCE.[1] In 1887, E. Schrader proposed that

[1]In 1871, J. Oppert ("Über Kedorlaomer," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 24:2 [1871]: 509–512) suggested that Chedorlaomer's name in the Septuagint, Χοδολλογομορ, was a transliteration of the Elamite name Kudur-Lagamar

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Amraphel was the Babylonian king Hammurabi (= Ammurapi).[2] T. G. Pinches, who deciphered some cuneiform inscriptions of the so-called *Spartoli Tablets* in the British Museum, thought they contained the names of the other three kings: Arioch of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer of Elam, and Tidal of Goiim.[3] Other scholars (e.g., F. Hommel, A. Jeremias, W. F. Albright, M. C. Astour) took up Pinches's discoveries and developed them.[4] Subsequent researches,

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("servant of Lagamaru"). No such name, however, has been found in historical records.

[2]E. Schrader, *The Cuneiform Inscriptions and the Old Testament* Vol. 2, trans. O. Whitehouse (London: Williams & Norgate, 1888), 299–300. J.-V. Scheil ("Chodorlahomor dans les Inscriptions Chaldéennes," *Revue Biblique* 5:4 [1896]: 600–601) also claimed to have found a tablet in the Istanbul Museum on which the name Kodorlahomer (= *Chedorlaomer*) appears in Hammurabi's missive to Sin Idinnam, the king of Larsa. Kodorlahomer is the Prince of Emutbal (West Elam). The claims of both Schrader and Scheil, however, have now been discredited.

[3]The Spartoli tablets have been dated variously from as early as the second millennium BCE to as late as the second century BCE. T. Pinches claimed to have found the names Kudur-laḫgumal, king of Elam; Tudḫula, king of Gutium; and Êri-Aaku, king of Larsa ("Certain Inscriptions and Records Referring to Babylonia and Elam and Their Rulers, and Other Matters," *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 29 [1897]: 43–89; also T. Pinches, *The Old Testament in the Light of the Historical Records and Legends of Assyria and Babylonia* [New York: E. & J. B. Young & Co., 1902], 223–232).

[4]F. Hommel popularized Pinches's work in his book, *Die altisraelitische Überlieferung in inschriftlicher Beleuchtung: Ein Einspruch gegen die Aufstellung der modernen Pentateuchkritik* (München: G. Franz'sche Hofbuchhandlung, 1897), 180–190. A. Jeremias ("Die sogenannten Kedorlaomer-Texte," in *Orientalistische Studien: Fritz Hommel zum sechzigsten Geburstag am 31 Juli 1914* [Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1917], 69–97) made some refinements in Pinches's transliterations and translations of the texts. See also W. Albright, "The Historical Background of Genesis XIV," *Journal of the Society of Oriental Research* 10 (1926): 231–269; M. Astour, "Political and Cosmic Symbolism in Genesis 14 and in Its Babylonian Sources," in A. Altmann, ed., *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 65–112; and *s.v.* "Chedorlaomer," in D. Freedman et al., eds., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 893–895.

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however, have discredited Pinches's findings; as G. J. Wenham points out, "though the names seem authentic … no extrabiblical sources attest that these kings [identified by Pinches] reigned simultaneously, let alone campaigned together in the West."[5]

Other scholars, like J. A. Emerton, W. Schatz, C. Westermann, and J. Doré, consider Genesis 14 to be a composite chapter consisting of three sections that originated from various periods.[6] The story of Abram as a warrior who liberated his nephew Lot in vv. 12–24 (omitting vv. 18–20) comes from the period of the judges. Emerton considers the story of Abram's victory over Chedorlaomer as "hero narrative" like the story of Gideon.[7] The purpose for inserting it in the patriarchal narratives, according to Westermann, is to give Abraham "a significance on the stage of world history by making him victor over four kings of powerful eastern empires."[8] The Melchizedek episode (vv. 18–20) was a later insertion within vv. 12–24, and the campaign of the four kings (vv. 1–11) was the last section to be added to the narrative.

G. Granerød treats Genesis 14 as a scribal insertion from the Second Temple period that serves to fill the gap in the narrative left by the statement in 13:17— "Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you"—which did not provide specific details about the extent of the land promised

[5]G. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 307.

[6]J. Emerton, "The Riddle of Genesis XIV," *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (1971): 403–439; J. Emerton, "Some False Clues in the Study of Genesis XIV," *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (1971): 24–47; W. Schatz, *Genesis 14: Eine Untersuchung*, EHS (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1972); C. Westermann, *Genesis 12–36* (London: SPCK, 1985), 191–192; J. Doré, "La rencontre Abraham-Melchisédech et le problème de l'unité littéraire de Genèse 14," in M. Carrez, J. Doré, & P. Grelot, eds., *De la Tôrah au Messie* (Paris: Desclée, 1981), 75–95.

[7]Emerton, "The Riddle of Genesis XIV," 431–433.

[8]Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 207.

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to Abram.[9] To compose the story of Abram as a warrior, the scribe borrowed from 1 Samuel 30 (for words and ideas), Gen. 10:19 and Dt. 29:22 (concerning the alliance of five cities in the Jordan plain), and Genesis 10 (for geographical information). He also utilized names of foreigners living in the diaspora.[10] According to Granerød, the scribe may have been a nationalist militant of sorts who desired to instill religious fervor among the people by holding up Abram as a model-liberator who defended his people from foreign domination.[11]

This variety of scholarly opinions as shown above suffices to show the complexity of determining the period wherein the various traditions were incorporated into Genesis 14.

The Melchizedek tradition (Gen. 14:18–20). Behind vv. 18–20 lies another ancient tradition, one which is different from that of Abram as a warrior. The language here is cultic—Melchizedek, king of Shalem (Jerusalem) and priest of God Most High (*ʾēl ʿelyôn*), appears abruptly in the narrative and brings out bread and wine to bless Abram. The latter accepts the blessing and gives a tenth of what he had to Melchizedek.

There are diverse opinions as well regarding the origin of this Melchizedek tradition. For Granerød, it developed in several stages, beginning with the application of Psalm 110, which was originally meant for the Davidic king, to Abraham as part of the elevation of the position of the patriarch in the Second Temple Period. It was now Abraham instead of the king whom YHWH addressed in Ps 110:1. Melchizedek in Ps. 110:4b, moreover, was not originally a personal name but a description of the king: "for my sake my king is loyal" (*ʿal-diḇrāṯî malkî-ṣeḏeq*).[12] The Abrahamic reinterpretation of Psalm 110 thus "functioned as a catalyst for an additional assimilation"—the

[9]G. Granerød, *Abraham and Melchizedek: Scribal Activity of Second Temple Times in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110*, BZAW 406 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 79–98.

[10]Granerød, *Abraham and Melchizedek*, 99–128.

[11]Granerød, *Abraham and Melchizedek*, 129–152.

[12]Granerød, *Abraham and Melchizedek*, 213–214.

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personification of Melchizedek.[13] The Melchizedek tradition, which developed from the intertextual (Abrahamic) reading of Psalm 110 and Genesis 14, was therefore eventually assimilated into the story of Abram's war exploit.

Yet, since the only evidence Granerød offers for the Abrahamic reading of Psalm 110 is from later rabbinic interpretation in the Babylonian Talmud and the 11th century Jewish commentator Rashi, his theory regarding the literary assimilation between Psalm 110 and Genesis 14 in the Second Temple Period appears to be built on a shaky foundation.

R. Cargill recently argued that the text of Gen. 14:18 originally read ***malkî-ṣeḏeq meleḵ səḏōm*** (Melchizedek king of Sodom) but that later scribes changed ***səḏōm*** (Sodom) to ***šālēm*** (Shalem) to avoid portraying Abram as being blessed by the priest of Sodom, a totally depraved city that was bound to be annihilated (Genesis 18–19).[14] This emendation thus produced a disjointed narrative in vv. 18–20.

Restoring the original reading, Cargill claims, would make a seamless narrative in Genesis 14. He supports this theory with the following arguments: Melchizedek succeeded his father Bera who died in battle (v. 10);[15] Shalem, a name invented by the scribes, was associated with Jerusalem only at a later time in the course of the sectarian debate between Jews and the Samaritans regarding the preeminence of their respective temples;[16] and Melchizedek offered to pay Abram some amount (not a tithe) for his effort in retrieving the people and goods of the city, although Abram refused the offer of payment.[17]

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[13]Granerød, *Abraham and Melchizedek*, 19, 232–238.

[14]R. Cargill, *Melchizedek, King of Sodom: How Scribes Invented the Biblical Priest-King* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 19–36.

[15]Cargill, *Melchizedek, King of Sodom*, 24–27.

[16]Cargill, *Melchizedek, King of Sodom*, 55–71.

[17]Cargill, *Melchizedek, King of Sodom*, 73–79.

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Cargill's proposal is not really new. In 1903, C. E. Anderson already suggested that Shalem was substituted for Sodom in v. 18 by a scribe who might have found it inappropriate that Abram "the father of the faithful took part with the king of Sodom in the worship of his god.…" Anderson, moreover, argues that the change might have also been motivated by a desire "to connect Abram with Jerusalem … then have Abram paying tax to the priest-king of Jerusalem." This would, in effect, provide an etiological justification for the tithing system in the Jerusalem Temple.[18]

The downside of Cargill's and Anderson's theory is that there is no attestation whatsoever in any of the ancient manuscripts of the Hebrew Scripture of a variant reading which has Sodom instead of Shalem in Gen. 14:18. Furthermore, Cargill's interpretation of the statement in Ps. 76:3 as antithetical—"His tent/tabernacle was in Shalem, *but* his residence is in Zion"[19]—is forced and unconvincing, and so his attempt to dissociate Jerusalem from Shalem fails.

It is more likely that the Melchizedek episode reflects the *modus vivendi* that existed between the cult of YHWH and that of the Canaanite god *ʾēl ʿelyôn* during the early monarchy period. When David captured Jerusalem and made it his capital, he brought the Ark into it, and so the worship of YHWH co-existed for a time with the worship of *ʾēl ʿelyôn*, the patron god of the former Jebusite city. David had two priests in his royal court to serve the mixed population of Jerusalem: Abiathar, a Levite, for the Israelite worshippers of YHWH and Zadok for the Jebusite worshippers of *ʾēl ʿelyôn*.[20] Thus, at a time when YHWH

[18]C. E. Anderson, "Who Was Melchizedek? A Suggested Emendation of Gen. 14:18," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 19:3 (1903): 176–177.

[19]Cargill, *Melchizedek, King of Sodom*, 59.

[20]R. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period* Vol. 1 (London: SCM Press, 1994), 129; see also C. Hauer, "Who Was Zadok?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82:1 (1963): 89–94 and H. Rowley, "Melchizedek and Zadok (Gen 14 and Ps 110)," in W. Baumgartner, O. Eissfeldt, K. Elliger, & L. Rost, eds., *Festschrift für Alfred Bertholet zum 80. Geburtstag* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1950), 468–469.

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religion was not yet strictly monotheistic, the YHWH worshippers might have also venerated *ʾēl ʿelyôn* and given tithes to his priests.

> Abraham is blessed by the priest of this god, accepts the blessing, and gives the priest the tithe in return. An exchange such as this was possible only in the early monarchy, a period of transition, when David and Solomon were kings of a territory in which Israelites lived peacefully with Canaanites.[21]

YHWH, however, assimilated the attributes of *ʾēl ʿelyôn* over the course of time to the extent that the latter became simply a title or another name for the God of Israel. Note that Abram himself identifies *ʾēl ʿelyôn* with YHWH in v. 22, even if this is anachronistic from the perspective of the history of Israelite religion—"through a syntagmatic study, clearly אל עליון is not any local deity but is Yahweh himself (v. 22); furthermore, he is identified as 'creator of heavens and earth.'"[22] It was upon YHWH that Abram swore not to receive anything from the king of Sodom. This identification of *ʾēl ʿelyôn* with YHWH, therefore, made it possible for later scribes and Bible readers to regard Melchizedek as a priest of the God of Israel before Moses, the founder of the YHWH religion, designated the Levites to serve YHWH (Exodus 32:25–29; see also Dt. 33:8–11).

J. A. Emerton suggests that "the story helped to legitimate Jerusalem as a site of a holy place for Israelites, and the friendship between Abram and Melchizedek was intended to help to make David's occupying the throne of the Jebusite city acceptable to both Israelites and Jebusites."[23] Moreover, according to G. von Rad,

> we know about the rift between Jerusalem … and the patriarchally faithful country population with whom the anointed in Jerusalem did

[21]Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 207.

[22]A. Chan, *Melchizedek Passages in the Bible: A Case Study for Inner-Biblical and Inter-Biblical Interpretation* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2016), 49.

[23]J. Emerton, "Some Problems in Genesis XIV," in G. Davies & R. Gordon, eds., *Studies on the Language and Literature of the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 535.

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> not ingratiate himself, and who were, moreover, reserved because of the material burdens and taxes that originated from him (cf. 1 Sam 8:11f).[24]

It is probable, therefore, that the story of Abram's submission and giving of tithes to Melchizedek provided these wary Judahites with a valid reason to submit to the Davidic king and pay him the tax.

When King Solomon banished Abiathar from Jerusalem for having supported his rival to the throne (Adonijah), the Levites were disenfranchised from serving in the Temple of Jerusalem. They were replaced by the Zadokites who might have traced their priestly lineage *at first* to Melchizedek and then *later on* to Aaron (1 Chr. 6:50–53). Zadok's and Melchizedek's names, which bear the term "zedek" (righteousness) either as a title of *ʾēl ʿelyôn* or as the name of another Canaanite god, may perhaps indicate their Jebusite origin.

During the period of the monarchy, it seems that various priestly families officiated in the YHWH shrines: the Zadokites in Jerusalem, the Aaronids in Bethel, the Mushite in Shechem, etc.[25] However, after the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel and the centralization of worship in Jerusalem undertaken by King Josiah, the Zadokites gained monopoly of the priesthood.

The Deuteronomic group who may have supported Josiah's reform program of centralizing worship in Jerusalem and who insisted on the ancient Mosaic tradition that priests who serve YHWH must be "sons of Levi" (Exod. 32:25–29; Dt. 33:8–11) looked down on the priests who were not Levites (cf. 1 Kgs. 12:31). The Zadokites' lineage, therefore, may have been rectified to show that they are descended from Aaron (1 Chr. 5:27–34; 6:35–38 [=NRSV 1 Chr. 6:1–8, 50–53])—"a pious fabrication at a later age," according to H. H. Rowley.

> That he [Zadok] should be given a full genealogy by the Chronicler is not surprising. For owing to the respective parts played by Abiathar and Zadok in the intrigue that preceded the accession of Solomon, the one

[24]G. von Rad, *Genesis* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 181.

[25]F. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1973), 195–215.

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> was dismissed from Jerusalem, and the other left without rival in the Jerusalem priesthood (1 Kgs 2:26f), with the result that his successors continued to monopolize the priestly offices of Jerusalem down to the Exile, and even the reform of Josiah failed to interfere with their privileges (2 Kgs 23:9), despite the provisions of Deuteronomy (18:6–8). Ezekiel rationalized this position of privilege, and laid it down that in the future community priestly functions should be reserved for the family of Zadok (Ezk 44:15), while the country priests who had failed to secure what the Deuteronomic reformers had proposed for them should be reduced to a sub-priestly status (Ezk 44:10ff). But by the time of the Chronicler the Priestly Code was already established, and while it accepted Ezekiel's principle of two grades of Temple attendants, it adopted a wider basis than Ezekiel's for the limits of the priesthood, which it assigned to the descendants of Aaron. It was therefore necessary to legitimate the family of Zadok within the family of Aaron, and the creation of the genealogy set out in Chronicles is the natural result.[26]

The priestly writers took it for granted in the post-exilic period that all who officiated in the Temple of Jerusalem were "sons of Aaron" or Levites. The Zadokites' superiority over the various Levitic groups was institutionalized in the three-tiered hierarchy of the Jewish priesthood that developed during this period: the *kōhēn gāḏōl* (high priest), the *kōhănîm* (priests), and the *ləwiyyim* (Levites).

2. Psalm 110

Psalm 110 is generally regarded as a royal psalm that describes the enthronement of the king of Jerusalem[27] and which may have been sung during the enthronement ceremony along with other royal

[26]H. Rowley, "Zadok and Nehushtan," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58:2 (1939): 113–141. Zadok's Jebusite origin is disputed by S. Olyan ("Zadok's Origins and the Tribal Politics of David," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 101:2 [1982]: 177–193). Olyan's suggestion that Zadok is an authentic Aaronid from Judah (pp. 183ff), however, is less convincing compared to Rowley's thesis.

[27]H.-J. Kraus, *Psalms 60–150* (Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 1989), 347–348. For a reconstruction of the enthronement ceremony of the Davidic king, see J. Corley, "Psalm 110 (109) and Israelite Royal Ritual," *Salmanticensis* 64:1 (2017): 41–71.

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psalms (e.g., Psalm 2 and 72). According to G. Ravasi, it "deserves to be placed among the glorious texts of the ancient Hebrew poetry … with a strong imprint of an ancient monarchical psalm, perhaps from the same epoch as David."[28] This psalm was then reinterpreted at a later time as referring to the Messiah.[29]

During the enthronement ritual, the king sits on the throne after being anointed (1 Kgs. 1:46; also 2 Kgs. 11:19). "YHWH says to my lord [the king], 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.' YHWH sends out from Zion your mighty scepter; rule in the midst of your foes" (Ps. 110:1–2). The new king wields a mighty scepter (*maṭṭēh-ʿoz*) as a symbol of royal authority (cf. Ps. 2:9; 45:7).

In accord with the concept of sacral monarchy, the king was regarded as the ultimate authority in both civil and religious spheres, and so exercised some priestly roles. When David brought the Ark to Jerusalem, for example, he sacrificed oxen and danced in the procession (2 Sam. 6:13–15). His sons were called priests (2 Sam. 8:18). The Davidic king administered the maintenance of the temple buildings and supported the sacrificial worship (2 Kgs. 12:5ff); he also supervised the temple finances (2 Kgs. 22:4ff). "Like the Babylonian kings, the descendants of David, too, were 'keepers of the sanctuary' (*zāninu*). So prayer was offered for the king in the cult (Pss. 20; 72)."[30]

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[28]According to G. Ravasi, "salmo monarchico antico, forse dell'epoca stessa di Davide, il Sal 110 merita quindi di essere collocate nella linea testi gloriosi dell'antica poesia ebraica dal Sal 18 al 76, da Gn 49:8–11 a Nm 24:17–19, di spiccata impronta moncarchica" (*Il Libro dei Salmi: Commento e Attualizzazione* Vol. III, Salmi 101–150 [Bologna: Edizione Dehoniane, 1985], 266).

[29]L. Alonso Schökel and C. Carniti regard the statement in Ps. 110:4b as an anomaly that "remains unexplained, unless the term *kohen* is taken in a metaphoric sense, equivalent to 'anointed' or restricted to the function of 'blessing', like what Melchizedek did." Given such difficulties, they propose as a last resort to consider Psalm 110 as messianic in its origin, with a vision of the Messiah embodying all the historical and institutional powers of Israel (*Salmos II [73–150]: Traducción, Introducciónes y Comentario* [Estella, Navarra: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1993], 1373).

[30]Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion*, 129.

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However, the priestly functions of the king of Jerusalem did not go unchallenged. When the priest Jehoiada became the power behind the throne of the boy-king Joash (835–795 BCE), the priestly class then may have become increasingly stronger and more assertive in challenging the priestly privileges of the king. The story in 2 Chr. 26:16–21, in which Azariah and the priests rebuked King Uzziah (781–740 BCE) for insisting on "making an offering to the Lord on the altar of incense" and for which he was struck with leprosy, hints at a tension between the king and the priestly class. The king of Jerusalem and his loyal supporters, in turn, may have defended and justified the king's priestly prerogatives by pointing out that he had succeeded to the throne of the king-priest of Shalem (Gen. 14:18) and that YHWH himself swore to him that "you are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Ps. 110:4b).

YHWH's oath confirming the king of Jerusalem "a priest forever" (Ps. 110:4b) is not really new. It simply reiterates God's previous promise to David in 2 Sam. 7:16: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure *forever* before me; your throne shall be established *forever*." What the oath does is simply to confirm that the Davidic ruler was a "king-priest" *from the very beginning of the dynasty and had always been so*, like Melchizedek. Both divine promises, furthermore, are unconditional: "I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul" (2 Sam. 7:15) || "the Lord … will not change his mind" (Ps. 110:4a).

The statement *ʿal-diḇrāṯî malkî-ṣeḏeq* in Ps. 110:4b is the *crux interpretum* of this psalm. The preposition *ʿal-diḇrāṯ* or *ʿal-dəḇar* has many nuances which have been translated in various ways, e.g., "because of," "for the sake of," "in the manner of," and "with regard to." The *hireq* suffixed to the preposition *ʿal-diḇrāṯî* is thought to be a *hireq compagnis* of the ancient construct form. The Septuagint translates the preposition as κατὰ τὴν τάξιν (LXX Ps. 109:4b) while the Latin Vulgate in turn renders it as *secundum ordinem* (Vul Ps. 109:4b), hence the popular English translation "*according to the order* of Melchizedek." The word "order," however, should not be invested with the meaning it would later acquire—after much theologizing—in the Sacrament of

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Holy Orders;[31] the noun τάξις is used elsewhere for the "arrangement," "grouping," "order," or "sequence" of the temple service of the Levites (1 Esdras 1:5, 15; Lk. 1:8). The preposition *ʿal-diḇrāṯî* or κατὰ τὴν τάξιν "does not indicate that a new priestly order is being established but rather the comparison that this king-priest is *like* or *in the manner of* Melchizedek in role."[32]

There is an alternative view, however, that takes the *hireq* attached to the preposition *ʿal-diḇrāṯî* to be a first-person pronominal suffix. Moreover, *malkî-ṣeḏeq* is regarded not as a name but as a construct chain which means "king of righteousness." *ʿal-diḇrāṯî malkî-ṣeḏeq* may thus be rendered as "according to my word, O king of righteousness"[33] (cf. Granerød's "for my sake my king is loyal"[34]). It is an alternative proposal worth considering indeed, though it is a conjecture and a recent interpretation. The Septuagint translation, in contrast, gives witness to an ancient interpretation.

3. Second Temple Period

The demise of the Davidic Kingdom raised hopes that a royal descendant would someday restore it in fulfillment of the promise YHWH made to David in 2 Samuel 7. Jewish eschatology developed in

[31]"The word *order* in Roman antiquity designated an established civil body, especially a governing body. *Ordinatio* means incorporation into an *ordo*. In the Church there are established bodies which Tradition, not without a basis in Sacred Scripture, has since ancient times called *taxeis* (Greek) or *ordines*. And so, the liturgy speaks of the *ordo episcoporum*, the *ordo presbyterorum*, the *ordo diaconorum*…" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993], no. 1537).

[32]D. Kennard, *Messiah Jesus: Christology in His Day and Ours* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 355. For a contrary view, see J. Mathews, *Melchizedek's Alternative Priestly Order: A Compositional Analysis of Genesis 14:18–20 and Its Echoes Throughout the Tanak*, BBRSup 8 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 3.

[33]Corley, "Psalm 110 (109) and Israelite Royal Ritual," 52, 54; Granerød, *Abraham and Melchizedek*, 213, n. 67.

[34]Granerød, *Abraham and Melchizedek*, 213, n. 67.

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which the future king from the Davidic line was expected to be anointed (*māšîʾaḥ*) with holy oil for anointing (*šemen mišḥaṭ-qōḏeš*) and rule the Jewish people during the Messianic Age. Both Gen. 14:18–20 and Ps. 110 were elaborated and reinterpreted messianically. Melchizedek became an antitype which described some of the attributes and roles of the royal and priestly Messiah, and was also given roles and traits that were no longer solely dependent on Gen. 14:18–20 and Psalm 110.[35]

A strand of Messianism thus took on a priestly character during this period when the priestly aristocracy exercised both political and religious leadership over the Jewish people. Although the sectarian community of Qumran pinned its hope on the earthly High Priest ("Messiah of Aaron") and the King ("Messiah of Israel"),[36] with the former always taking precedence over the latter (1QS 9:11; 1QSa 2:11–17), they believed it would be the celestial priest-warrior Melchizedek who would triumph over evil and establish an era of peace.[37] A fragment of the Dead Sea Scrolls (11QMelch 2:7–8) presents Melchizedek as an eschatological divine being (*ʾĕlōhîm*) who will proclaim the final Day of Atonement, atone for the sins of all the people in his lot, and judge them. In 4Q'Amram^{b}, 4QṬeharot D, and 4QBerakot A, the archangel Michael as Melchizedek (king of righteousness) fights Belial as Melchireša' (king of wickedness). These two figures serve as opposing angels who will lead the sons of light and the sons of darkness in an eschatological battle.[38]

Other traditions. According to the first century CE Jewish sectarian work "The Exaltation of Melchizedek" in 2 Enoch (also called "Slavonic Enoch"), Melchizedek was born of a virgin named Sothonim

[35]L. Stuckenbruck, "Melchizedek in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 41:1 (2018): 124–138.

[36]M. Flowers, "The Two Messiahs and Melchizedek in 11QMelchizedek," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 7:2 (2016): 194–227.

[37]P. Kobelski, *Melchizedek and Melchireša'* (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1981); M. Reiss, "The Melchizedek Traditions," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 26:2 (2012): 262–263.

[38]Kobelski, *Melchizedek and Melchireša'*, 75–83.

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(or Sofonim), the wife of Nir, brother of Noah.[39] The first century Jewish historian Josephus regarded him as a Canaanite warrior in the *War of the Jews* and yet as a priest in *Jewish Antiquity*. The Jewish philosopher Philo revered him as the *Logos* who was also a priest.

4. Letter to the Hebrews

The Letter to the Hebrews calls Jesus Christ a High Priest (ἀρχιερεὺς) ten times (Heb. 2:17; 3:1; 4:14, 15; 5:5, 10; 6:20; 7:26; 8:1; 9:11) and a priest (ἱερεὺς) five times (Heb. 5:6; 7:11, 17, 21; 10:21). Yet where did the author of the letter get the idea that Jesus was a priest? The early Christian community may already have had some inchoate notion of the priestly identity of Jesus prior to the Letter. His words at the Last Supper, for instance, allude to the expiatory character of his death on the cross.[40] Paul's reference to Jesus's death as a "propitiation in his blood" (ἱλαστήριον … ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι) in Rom. 3:25 already anticipates the Letter to the Hebrews's reflection on Jesus's priestly role on the celestial Day of Atonement.[41] The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE and the cessation of animal sacrifice may have precipitated reflection on the Eucharist as Jesus's sacrifice surpassing the old. Jesus's role as a mediator or intercessor at the right hand of God (Acts 5:31; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20f), moreover, may also have been interpreted as a priestly function.[42]

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[39]A. Orlov, "Melchizedek Legend of 2 (Slavonic) Enoch," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 31:1 (2000): 26–27.

[40]Mt. 26:26–28; Mk. 14:22–23; Lk. 22:19–20; 1 Cor. 11:24–25; see also Rom. 3:24–25; 5:9; Eph. 5:2; 7:1; Col. 1:14, 20.

[41]M. Tiwald, "Christ as Hilasterion (Rom 3:25): Pauline Theology on the Day of Atonement in the Mirror of Early Jewish Thought," in T. Hieke & T. Nicklas, eds., *The Day of Atonement: Its Interpretations in Early Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 189–209.

[42]G. Granerød suggests that Heb. 1:1–4 is a Christian hymn that contains a tradition on Jesus's priesthood "making purification of sins and being seated at God's right hand" ("Melchizedek in Hebrews 7," *Biblica* 90:2 [2009]: 190–191).

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It is the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, however, who explicitly refers to Jesus Christ as a priest. Reflecting and theologizing on the priesthood of Christ, he typologized Gen. 14:18–20, Psalm 110, and some of the Melchizedek traditions that developed during the Second Temple period. He explains in Heb. 5:1–10 how Jesus Christ became a High Priest: "[he] did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but [was appointed by] the one who said to him, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you' [Ps. 2:7b]; as he says also in another place, 'You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek'" (vv. 5–6). The writer quotes from Ps. 2:7b and then LXX Ps. 109:4b, both of which are enthronement psalms which the Jews have reinterpreted messianically in the Second Temple Period. His emphasis in this chapter is on Jesus's humility and obedience to the will of his Father: "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered" (v. 8). He was made perfect for this reason, and "became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek" (vv. 9–10).

However, before the author discusses further the priesthood of Jesus Christ, he first explains the superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood over the Levitic one in Heb. 7:1–10 by typologizing the story in Gen. 14:18–20 and YHWH's oath in LXX Ps. 109:4b.

Melchizedek's eternal priesthood. "Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God (ἀφωμοιωμένος δὲ τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ),[43] he remains a priest forever" (v. 3). The author deduces his argument from Gen. 14:18, in which Melchizedek suddenly and mysteriously appears in vv. 18–19 without any introduction of his family lineage,[44]

[43]The statement does not bestow parity with the Son of God on Melchizedek. The absence of his genealogy (required for the Israelite priesthood) prefigures the priesthood of the Son of God not in his pre-existence but in his glorified state. Cf. A. Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest*, trans. J. Orchard (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1980), 156–157.

[44]According to Granerød, the surplus information given in Heb. 7:3 is based on an "argument from silence"—no genealogy of Melchizedek is given in the Bible

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and from Ps. 110:4b, in which YHWH swears to the king that he is "a priest forever" (*kōhēn ləʿôlām*) like Melchizedek.

Melchizedek imparting a blessing and receiving a tithe. Melchizedek's superiority over the Levites is also manifested by the blessing he gave to Abram (who represents the Levites) and the tithe which Abram gave in turn to Melchizedek: "It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.… One might even say that Levi himself … paid tithes through Abraham, for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him" (vv. 7–10).[45]

The author then explains in Heb. 7:11–28 the excellence of Jesus's priesthood based on the antitype of Melchizedek:

> One who has become a priest, not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life. For it is attested of him, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." (vv. 16–17)

> Consequently, he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.… For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever. (vv. 25, 28)

Here the author argues not only on the basis of God's oath in LXX Ps. 109:4b which he swore to Jesus Christ but also, and more importantly, "through the power of an indestructible life"—a clear reference to Jesus's resurrection and to his divinity as "Son who has been made perfect forever"—now enthroned at God's right hand, perpetually interceding on behalf of humanity before his Father. "He holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever" (Heb. 7:24).

("Melchizedek in Hebrews 7," 188–202). For M. Paul, however, "he [Zadok] did have a genealogy, though not the required one" ("The Order of Melchizedek [Ps 110:4 and Heb 7:3]," *Westminster Theological Journal* 49:1 [1987]: 205).

[45]J. Compton, *Psalm 110 and the Logic of Hebrews* (London: Bloomsbury-T. & T. Clark, 2015), 81–85.

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The Yom Kippur and the Melchizedek tradition in 11QMelch. The temple rituals in the annual celebration of Yom Kippur (cf. Leviticus 16)[46] and, quite possibly, the Melchizedek tradition in the Dead Sea Scrolls have a bearing on the author's theologizing on the priesthood of Jesus Christ in Hebrews 9. In particular, 11QMelch's portrayal of the celestial high priest Melchizedek proclaiming the final Day of Atonement and atoning for the sins of the people may have some influence on the soteriology of the Letter to the Hebrews, which depicts Jesus as the eternal High Priest who enters the heavenly sanctuary to offer his own blood to atone for the sins of the people "once for all":

> when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! For this reason, he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant. (Heb. 9:11–15)

The Yom Kippur, a most important part of the religious heritage of Judaism, is creatively reconfigured thus in Hebrews 9 in light of faith in Jesus Christ, and in a way that has far-reaching consequences for both the Christian and Jewish religions. "The result is a startlingly original interpretation of the nature and significance of Jesus' death that uses themes and practices of Jewish temple worship metaphorically to argue for the uniqueness of Jesus' saving significance."[47]

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[46]G. Stemberger, "Yom Kippur in Mishnah Yoma," in T. Hieke & T. Nicklas, eds., *The Day of Atonement*, 121–137.

[47]C. Eberhart & D. Schweitzer, "The Unique Sacrifice of Christ According to Hebrews 9: A Study in Theological Creativity," *Religions* 10:47 (2019): 1.

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Summary

The Melchizedek traditions may have originated from the early monarchy period when Jerusalem became the center of YHWH worship alongside the cult of *ʾēl ʿelyôn*, the city's patron god. The meeting of Abram and Melchizedek in Gen. 14:18–20 reflects a situation of religious tolerance, a situation in which worshippers of YHWH may have also venerated *ʾēl ʿelyôn* and given tithes to his priests. The story of Abram giving tithe to Melchizedek may have also set an example for the rural people of Judah to pay taxes to the King of Jerusalem. Over the course of time, moreover, YHWH assimilated the attributes of *ʾēl ʿelyôn* to the extent that the latter became simply a title or another name for the God of Israel. Verse 22, in which Abram identifies YHWH with *ʾēl ʿelyôn*, reflects this development.

The Davidic kings in Jerusalem may have justified their priestly prerogatives by pointing out that they have succeeded to the throne of Melchizedek who was both King and Priest. Psalm 110, which was sung during the enthronement of the Davidic King, contains an oracle in which God swears to the King of Jerusalem that "you are a priest forever like Melchizedek."

The Zadokites who replaced the Levites in the service of YHWH may have claimed lineage or kinship with the legendary figure of Melchizedek at first. But when the Deuteronomic circle began to insist on the Mosaic law designating the Levites to serve YHWH, Zadok's genealogy may have been rectified to show that he was a direct descendant of Aaron.

The fall of Jerusalem raised the hope that a scion of David would someday restore the kingdom of Judah. A strand of Messianism thus assumed a priestly character, perhaps due to the influence of the priestly aristocracy in the Second Temple Period. The Melchizedek traditions were typologized and elaborated to reflect the attributes of a priestly Messiah. He was given traits that were no longer dependent on Gen. 14:18–20 and Psalm 110. Some fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls portray Melchizedek as an angelic warrior who would triumph over Melchireša‘ in the eschatological battle; others depict him as a

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divine being who would inaugurate the final Day of Atonement and atone for the sins of his people.

In his theologizing on the priesthood of Jesus Christ, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews utilized not only Gen. 14:18–20 and Psalm 110 but also some legends and *midrashim* as well concerning the Melchizedek that developed in the Second Temple Period. He first demonstrates the superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood over the Levitic one, then discusses the priesthood of Jesus Christ based on the typology of Melchizedek. He also presents a soteriology of Jesus Christ as High Priest which may have been influenced by the Dead Sea Scrolls' portrayal of Melchizedek inaugurating the final Day of Atonement.

Our study has thus shown how the Melchizedek traditions evolved over the course of history and how they contributed to the development of a theology (in the Letter to the Hebrews) of the priesthood of Jesus Christ which is divine, messianic, and supra-Levitical. Indeed, the Melchizedek traditions continued to develop even after the Bible had been fixed in writing.[48] A study of these post-biblical traditions—in both patristic and rabbinic literatures—is, however, beyond the scope of this essay.

[48]A. Rodríguez, "La Exegesis de Melquisedec entre los Padres de la Iglesia y Beda el Venerable," *Anales de Historia Antigua, Medieval y Moderna* 51 (2017): 61–70; M. McNamara, "Melchizedek: Gen 14, 17–20 in the Targums, in Rabbinic and Early Christian Literature," *Biblica* 81:1 (2000): 1–31; I. Chirilă, S. Paşca-Tuşa, & E. Oneţiu, "Reconstitution of Melchizedek's History in Rabbinic and Christian Traditions," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 16:48 (Winter 2017): 3–15; S. Minov, "Reception of the Greek Story of Melchizedek in Syriac Christian Tradition," *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 26:2 (2016): 108–143.

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