

THE IDENTITY OF MELCHIZEDEK IN GEN. 14:18-20

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by

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The question of Melchizedek's identity in Gen. 14:18-20 is bound up with his historicity. Is he history, tradition, or invention? There are opinions running the gamut, all nuanced differently. The following will overview these defining elements of Melchizedek: (1) his designation as both priest and king, (2) the name Melchizedek, (3) the toponym Salem, (4) El Elyon, and (5) the tithe.

Although it is not evidenced historically in the Canaanite culture, sacral kingship was common in the ancient Near East.<sup>1</sup> Many scholars believe that the king-priest figure is historical, or at least based upon tradition, regardless of the date ultimately assigned. S. R. Driver sees the dual office as the "prototype for the Isr. monarchy, and Isr. priesthood," but he does not think the Christological typology of the Hebrew writer to be historical.<sup>2</sup> Typological interpretation, however, is also a popular position.<sup>3</sup> J. A. Fitzmyer's seminal article demonstrates that Heb. 7 is a midrash on Gen. 14:18-20, revealing the origins of the Hebrew writer's typology.<sup>4</sup> Contrary to

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<sup>1</sup>John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, The International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 268; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 179; Geoffrey G. Willis, "Melchisedech, The Priest of the Most High God," *Downside Review* 96 (October 1978): 268.

<sup>2</sup>S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen & Co., 1904), 164, 167; see also Willis, 270.

<sup>3</sup>This typology is usually seen through the interpretive lens of Ps. 110 as well as Heb. 7. See Chad L. Bird, "Typological Interpretation Within the Old Testament: Melchizedekian Typology," *Concordia Journal* 26 (January 2000): 36-52; T. K. Thomas, "Melchizedek, King and Priest: An Ecumenical Paradigm?" *Ecumenical Review* 52 (July 2001): 404.

<sup>4</sup>Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "'Now this Melchizedek. . .' (Heb 7,1)," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (July 1963): 317.

Driver, J. A. Emerton agrees with H. Gunkel, who does not find it likely that Judaism would have selected a Canaanite to be its religious prototype.<sup>5</sup> Other positions on the priest-king rely more heavily on other aspects of the narrative, to which we now turn.

“Melchizedek” is usually translated: “my king is Sedeq,” “Milku is righteous,” or “my king is righteous.”<sup>6</sup> The first two are legitimate theophoric names, but “my king is Sedeq” is generally thought to be the best rendering.<sup>7</sup> R. H. Smith says Melchizedek is “a good Late Bronze Palestinian name.”<sup>8</sup> Willis thinks, instead, that Melchizedek is “King of Righteousness”—a title rather than a personal name.<sup>9</sup> The general consensus, though, is that Melchizedek is the name of a person, regardless of historicity.

The phrase “king of Salem” is of greater consequence. Salem is traditionally identified with Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup> J. A. Emerton supports this conclusion and thinks it is reinforced by the notion

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<sup>5</sup>John A. Emerton, “Riddle of Genesis 14,” *Vetus Testamentum* 21 (October 1971): 419, quoting H. Gunkel, *Genesis* (Gottingen, 1901), 261.

<sup>6</sup>Driver, 164; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 409; Rad, 179; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 316.

<sup>7</sup>M. Delcor, “Melchizedek from Genesis to the Qumran Texts and the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 2 (December 1971): 115; Loren R. Fisher, “Abraham and His Priest-King,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (September 1962): 265; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Melchizedek in the MT, LXX, and the NT,” *Biblica* 81 (2000): 65.

<sup>8</sup>Robert Houston Smith, “Abram and Melchizedek,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77 (1965): 145.

<sup>9</sup>Willis, 272.

<sup>10</sup>Hamilton, 409; Rad, 179.

that Salem would have been an important city.<sup>11</sup> J. G. Gammie, however, traces the Melchizedek tradition through changing loci, the last of which is Jerusalem.<sup>12</sup>

W. F. Albright proposed the highly influential emendation that read, “a king allied to him,” leaving out Salem altogether.<sup>13</sup> He later changed his emendation to include reference to Jerusalem, while maintaining the sense of his earlier rendering.<sup>14</sup> Smith translates it similarly as, “a submissive king,” without changing the text.<sup>15</sup> Fisher notes the theophoric element in Salem, and O. Margalith takes this a step further, proposing “Melchizedek (who is also called Melechshalem).”<sup>16</sup> Early on, C. E. Anderson changed “Salem” to “Sodom” so that the whole chapter would flow more smoothly.<sup>17</sup>

The primary importance of Salem’s identification is that the association with Jerusalem gives the Melchizedek tradition a strong dating in the Early Monarchy for many scholars. J. C. McCullough says, “Thus the story of Gen. 14:18ff. could then be used as propaganda for the

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<sup>11</sup>Emerton, 413.

<sup>12</sup>John G. Gammie, “Loci of the Melchizedek Tradition of Genesis 14:18-20,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 90 (December 1971): 385-396.

<sup>13</sup>W. F. Albright, “Abraham the Hebrew,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 163 (October 1961): 52.

<sup>14</sup>W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion, 7 (London: The Athlone Press, 1968), 231.

<sup>15</sup>Smith, 145.

<sup>16</sup>Fisher, 265; Othniel Margalith, “The Riddle of Genesis 14 and Melchizedek,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 112 (2000): 506.

<sup>17</sup>Charles Edo Anderson, “Who Was Melchizedek?--A Suggested Emendation of Gen. 14.18,” *American Journal of Semitic Languages* 19 (1902-1903): 176-77.

Davidic House.”<sup>18</sup> A Patriarchal connection is made with Jerusalem, which is found nowhere else in scripture.<sup>19</sup>

J. Morgenstern believes that because there is no attested early Hebraic usage of “Salem” for “Jerusalem,” a post-exilic date is more likely.<sup>20</sup> He concludes that it must be a late adaptation based upon Messianic thought. Both the Davidic and the post-exilic dating need to be considered further in light of other elements.

The second major component of the Early Monarchy dating of the Melchizedek tradition is the tithe. Because of the unspecified subject and object of the sentence, there are two distinct positions: Abraham gave to Melchizedek, or Melchizedek gave to Abraham. The traditional view, of course, is that Abraham tithed to Melchizedek. There are three basic reasons for Abraham to have tithed: it was Melchizedek’s priestly due,<sup>21</sup> his sovereign right,<sup>22</sup> or Abraham’s response to his blessing.<sup>23</sup> Delcor describes the resulting function in this way:

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<sup>18</sup>John C. McCullough, “Melchizedek’s Varied Role in Early Exegetical Tradition,” *Theological Review* 1 (November 1978): 54.

<sup>19</sup>Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis, The Heritage of Biblical Israel*, vol. 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 117.

<sup>20</sup>Julian Morgenstern, “Genesis 14,” in *Studies in Jewish Literature*, ed. Julian Morgenstern, David Neumark, and David Philipson (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1913), 234.

<sup>21</sup>Driver, 166; Skinner, 269.

<sup>22</sup>Rad, 180; An opposing view is offered by Hamilton, 413.

<sup>23</sup>J. Gordon McConville, “Abraham and Melchizedek,” in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12-50*, ed. R. S. Hess, P. E. Satterthwaite, and G. J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 115; Sarna, 116; Wenham, 317; Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 115.

The Davidic king therefore appears here as heir of the Canaanite priest-king. He will have authority over his people, as Melchizedek had over Abraham. Doubtless he will also receive from this people the tithe, as the priest of Salem received it from Abraham.<sup>24</sup>

The contrasting position is rooted in Albright's emendation. Fitzmyer believes Melchizedek, as the allied vassal, paid Abraham.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Smith most naturally sees his "submissive king" as tithing to Abraham.<sup>26</sup> Lastly, somewhat related to Smith's "covenanting scene" is D. Elgavish's viewpoint.<sup>27</sup> He understands the entire episode to describe the formation of a treaty.<sup>28</sup>

The last question in regard to the identity of Melchizedek is at once the most crucial, the most straightforward, and the farthest beyond the scope of this survey. Is Melchizedek a priest of Yahweh, or does El Elyon signify a pagan deity? Neither position is without proponents, but the majority certainly sees Melchizedek as a pagan priest.<sup>29</sup> The simplest reason is that the name is directly related to the Canaanite pantheon.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Delcor, 121.

<sup>25</sup>Fitzmyer, "Now This Melchizedek," 318.

<sup>26</sup>Smith, 134. Smith favors Shechem for Salem.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 141.

<sup>28</sup>David Elgavish, "The Encounter of Abram and Melchizedek King of Salem: A Covenant Establishing Ceremony," in *Studies in the Book of Genesis*, ed. A. Wenin (Leuven: University Press, 2001).

<sup>29</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 136-37; Fisher, 266; Fitzmyer, "Now This Melchizedek," 315; Ignatius Hunt, "Recent Melchizedek Study," in *Bible in Current Catholic Thought*, ed. John L. McKenzie (New York: Herder & Herder, 1962), 25-29; McConville, 115; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis, The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 104; Thomas, 409; Rad, 180; Westermann, 116.

<sup>30</sup>Fitzmyer, "Melchizedek in the MT," 66.

The opposing view takes Abraham's words "Yahweh El Elyon" as a confirmation rather than a correction.<sup>31</sup> T. de Kruijf says it is "possible that the proposition *he was priest of God Most High* is meant as an explanation of the name of God used by Melchizedek in his blessing."<sup>32</sup> F. L. Horton finds the evidence inconclusive.<sup>33</sup>

As an overview, this paper does not cover all the considerations of Melchizedek. Interpretive threads such as the Qumran scroll 11QMelchizedek or the rabbinic identification of Melchizedek as Shem, the son of Noah, have contributed to the investigation.<sup>34</sup> These are, however, tangential to the standard interpretations. Still, mainstream scholarship itself is far from settled on the issue. The Melchizedek narrative has, as Speiser puts it, "all the ingredients of historicity,"<sup>35</sup> and yet many indications of later influences. Is Melchizedek history, tradition, or invention? Perhaps he is some of each.

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<sup>31</sup>Hamilton, 410; Sarna, 117; Wenham, 322.

<sup>32</sup>Theo de Kruijf, "The Priest-King Melchizedek: The Reception of Gen 14,18-20 in Hebrews Mediated by Psalm 110," *Bijdragen* 54 (October–December 1993): 394.

<sup>33</sup>Fred L. Horton, Jr., *The Melchizedek Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 20.

<sup>34</sup>For 11QMelch see Anders Aschim, "Melchizedek the Liberator: An Early Interpretation of Genesis 14?" *Society of Biblical Literature 1996 Seminar Papers*, 35:243-58; Gareth L. Cockerill, "Melchizedek or 'King of Righteousness,'" *Evangelical Quarterly* 63 (October 1991): 305-312; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Further Light on Melchizedek from Qumran Cave 11," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (March 1967): 25-47; Paul J. Kobelski, *Melchizedek and Melchiresa*, The Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series, 10 (Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America), 1981; Yigael Yadin, "A Note on Melchizedek and Qumran," *Israel Exploration Journal* 15 (1965): 152-54. For Shem see Martin McNamara, "Melchizedek: Gen 14,17-20 in the Targums, in Rabbinic and Early Christian Literature," *Biblica* 81 (2000): 1-31; Jakob J. Petuchowski, "The Controversial Figure of Melchizedek," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 28 (1957): 127-136; Stephen E. Robinson, "The Apocryphal Story of Melchizedek," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 18 (June 1987): 26-39.

<sup>35</sup>Speiser, 109.

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