

DISCOVERING THE BIBLE & OUR BIBLICAL HERITAGES

Learning about the histories of Bibles, beliefs, movements, institutions, events, and leaders of our Judeo-Christian Biblical Heritages.

2013 • NUMBER 8

Melchizedek: High Priest & Father of Tithing

By Jim Myers

Melchizedek plays a very important role in Christianity. Many believe he was the High Priest of a priesthood that replaced the Levites -- *and also the father of Christian tithing*. He plays a much different role in Judaism. Interestingly, Melchizedek is only mentioned twice in the Hebrew Bible and nine times in the New Testament.

His first appearance is in Genesis 14. The way the account is written raises a number of questions, one of which is whether the account about Melchizedek was originally part of the context or was inserted later. I increased the indentation on the part about Melchizedek in order to show how the context that begins with the king of Sodom appears to flow smoothly if the Melchizedek portion is removed. Read it with and without the Melchizedek account.

And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them unto Dan. And he divided himself against them, he and his servants, by night, and smote them, and pursued them unto Hobah, which is on the left hand of Damascus. And he brought back all the goods, and also brought again his brother Lot, and his goods, and the women also, and the people.

And the king of Sodom went out to meet him after his return from the slaughter of Chedorlaomer, and of the kings that were with him, at the valley of Shaveh, which is the king's dale.¹

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine. He was the priest of the Most High EL. And he blessed him, and said, "Blessed be Abram of the Most High EL, Possessor of Heaven and Earth. And blessed be the Most High EL, which has delivered your enemies into your hand." And he gave him a tenth of all.²

And the king of Sodom said unto Abram, "Give me the persons, and take the goods for yourself."

And Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have lifted up my hand unto YAHWEH EL, the Most High, the Possessor of Heaven and Earth, that I will not take from a thread even to a shoe-latchet, and that I will not take any thing that is yours, lest you should say, I have made Abram rich."³

Here is what it reveals about Melchizedek?

- (1) He was the king of Salem.
- (2) He was the priest of the most high EL.
- (3) He gave Abram bread and wine.
- (4) He blessed Abram.
- (5) Identified EL as the "possessor of heaven and earth."

As you probably know, *our goal is to view the ancient Hebrew text through the eyes of the author.* The first challenge we encounter here is the word "Melchizedek." Let's take a moment to review the two primary choices English translators have to make when they are working with the ancient Hebrew words.

- (1) **Translate the Hebrew word.** – The translator determines what the equivalent English meaning is and records it in the translation.
- (2) **Transliterate the Hebrew word.** – The translator determines what the equivalent English letters are for the Hebrew letters of the word and records them in the translation.

In this case, the translators chose to transliterate, but they failed to do it accurately. In the Hebrew manuscript we find -- (← Hebrew is read from right to left). An accurate transliteration of the Hebrew would be **Malki-Tzedeq**. Notice that there are two Hebrew words; not just one as we find in English translations. Now let's translate the two words.

- (1) **MALKI** may be translated as "my king" or "king of."
- (2) **TZEDEQ** means "righteous."

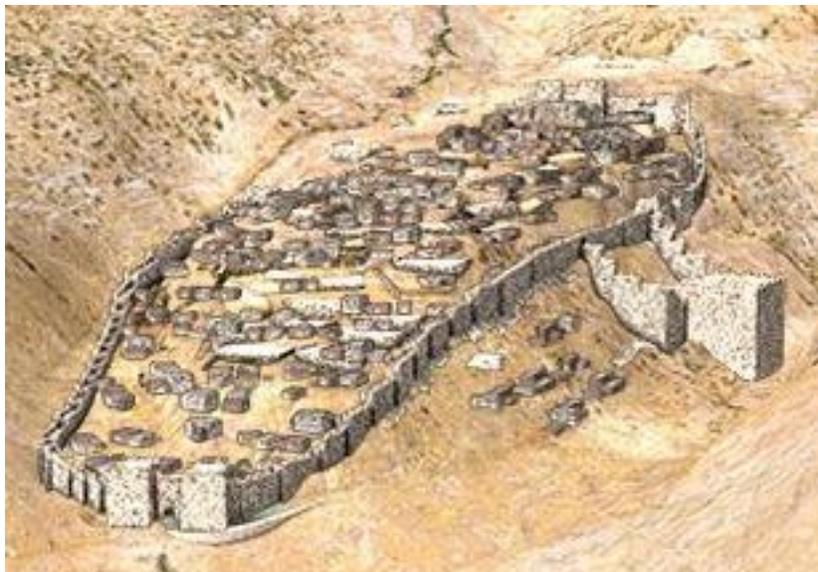
We have two possible options for our translation – "**my king is righteous**" or "**righteous king.**" Or, if we want to stick with a transliteration, it would be "**Malki-Tzedeq**" instead of Melchizedek. So, *we must decide whether the ancient author was recording the name of the king-priest or was he describing what he did?*

Now let's turn our attention to the place called **Salem**? The Hebrew word for "Salem" is , however a more accurate transliteration is "**Shalem.**" It also appears only two times in the Hebrew Bible. Below is its second appearance:

In Judah, ELOHIYM is known. His name is great in Israel.
In Salem, is also His tabernacle. His dwelling place is in Zion.⁴

This Psalm connects Salem to Judah and Zion, which means it is a reference to "Jerusalem." The time period in which Abram lived is usually thought to be about 2000 BCE; a very long time before Moses and the tabernacle. During Abram's time, it was a Canaanite village. It should be noted that there is a village called **Rušalim** in the *Execration texts of the Middle Kingdom of Egypt* (c. 19th century BCE) that is widely, but not universally, identified as Jerusalem. There is also a place called **Urušalimin** in the *Amarna letters of Abdi-Heba* (1330s BCE) that is also linked to Jerusalem.

Canaanite villages usually had a local patron god, and evidence links a god named **Shalem** to this village during the Bronze Age. *The name "Yerushalem" or "Yerushalayim" (Jerusalem) first appears in the Bible in the book of Joshua.*⁵ Below is a drawing of Jerusalem around 1000 BCE, which would be about a thousand years after Abram. It is probably a little larger here, but the drawing will give you an idea about the setting of this account, how small village was and what being a king-priest ruled.



SOURCE⁶

Now let's consider the name of the god for whom he served as a priest. As we saw above, "he was the priest of the Most High EL." Who or what is "EL?" The Hebrew word transliterated "EL" can be translated in the following ways:

- (1) **god** – a very old Semitic term for deity.
- (2) **El** – the name of a Canaanite deity⁷

So, our options for the Hebrew word EL are "god or it is the name of the Canaanite god "El." Many Bible readers project their beliefs into the words of their Bible and say that it was YAHWEH, because of what the king-priest did – *he brought Abram bread and wine and blessed Abram*. In this case, we often also find "monotheism" projected back into this section, as well as the belief that Abram as a Jew. This, however, does not fit the historical or textual context of the account. At the time of Abram, Canaan was

polytheistic with many different gods scattered throughout the different villages, in addition to the chief deity El. Let's make sure we understand the following:

- (1) It will not be until Abram's twelve great-sons are born that the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel will exist, one of which will be Levi from which the Israelite priesthood will come.
- (2) It will be another 500 to 700 years before Moses receives the commandments from YAHWEH and constructs the tabernacle.
- (3) It will be another 900 years before YAHWEH establishes the office of king for the Israelites and the king must come from the tribe of Judah.

Obviously, the king-priest of Salem doesn't meet any of the above requirements for kingship or priesthood.

Now let's turn to the question of why an account of a Canaanite king-priest would be included in the Hebrew Bible. The key to finding that answer is the word **TzeDEQ**. It is from the stem **TzDQ** which is found in very important words in the Hebrew Bible. It was used in an earlier account to describe another man – *Noah was a righteous (TzADIQ) man.*⁸ It will later be used to describe Abraham. All three men are described as **TzDIQ** and that is what connects Noah, the king-priest of Salem and Abraham. It reveals that all three share the same value TzDQ (righteousness), which in this context specifically means – *doing what is right,* "which specifically means in this context, *the preservation and protection of human life.*" Keep this in mind as we continue, because it is why the account of the king-priest is in the biblical text.

As pointed out above, the accounts recorded in Genesis took place in a polytheistic environment - *Mesopotamia, Canaan and Egypt.* After Moses receives the Law at Sinai and the Israelites settle their new homeland, monotheism will become the focus of the Hebrew Bible. However, Genesis records the process in which **YAHWEHism** – *placing YAHWEH above the other gods* – took place before monotheism became the norm. Abram brought YAHWEHism to Canaan. This difference concerning their deity can be seen in the words of the king-priest and Abram.

- (1) The king-priest said: "Blessed be Abram of **the Most High EL**, Possessor of Heaven and Earth."
- (2) Abram said: "I have lifted up my hand unto **YAHWEH EL, the Most High**, the Possessor of Heaven and Earth."

The primary focus however, isn't the gods in the account – *it is on the fact that the king-priest is a TzADIQ (righteous-king).* Keep in mind that Noah was saved from the flood not because he had the right theology; it was because "**Noah did TzDEQAH (righteousness).**" Did you recognize the act of "righteousness" the king-priest did in the above account? He "brought forth bread and wine" for Abram. *Contrary to some commentaries, he wasn't presenting Abram with the Eucharist.*

The ancient author's placed important clues in the Hebrew text to make sure his Jewish audience clearly understood the point he was making. The first clue can only be seen in the Hebrew language he used here.

It does not use the normal non-emphatic Hebrew sentence order: Verb with vav conversive + subject: *vayozu Melchizedek* – "And Melchizedek brought forth," but the reverse order of: subject + verb: *u-Melchizedek . . . hozu* "but **Melchizedek did bring** – bread and wine."⁹

This places the focus is on what the king-priest did – **he gave** to Abram. The second clue is revealed by Abram's response -- and **he gave** him a tenth of all.

The king-priest welcomed the victor back by giving him food and drink. Abram responded by giving him a tenth of what he had acquired in the battles he fought. The king-priest showed hospitality to Abram and he responded by presenting him with a generous gift. The generosity of both, **TZEDAQAH** (righteousness), is what the Hebrew text highlights here. Some rabbis say that this was when Abram learned about hospitality, which would become one of his defining qualities. Now, to make the point even clearer, their actions are compared to those of the king of Sodom:

And the king of Sodom said unto Abram, "**Give me** the persons, and take the goods for yourself."

How does the king of Sodom respond to the man that saved his nation and people? It isn't with hospitality and generosity! The first two words out of his mouth were – "**give me.**" He didn't ask about his people or even thank Abram. **TzDQ** (righteousness – the preservation and protection of human life) is what YAHWEH looks for – and that is the primary lesson of this account.

There is much more we could learn from this account, but that will have to wait for a future study. Now let's turn to the only other verse in the Hebrew Bible in which Melchizedek appears, Psalm 110. Below is a very familiar translation:

The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."

"The LORD" is the translation of the Hebrew name "YAHWEH" and He is addressing King David. Some commentaries connect the idea of David being a priest to the verses below from II Samuel:

David reigned over all Israel, **doing** what was just and **TzDQ** (righteous) **for all his people**. Joab son of Zeruiah was over the army; Jehoshaphat son of Ahilud was recorder; Zadok son of Ahitub and Ahimelek son of Abiathar were priests; Seraiah was secretary; Benaiah son of Jehoiada was over the Kerethites and Pelethites; and **David's sons were priests.**¹⁰

Just like the earlier king-priest of Salem, David did **TzDQ** (righteousness) and he was viewed in the same light as the king-priest that welcomed Abram back. The psalm poetically bestows the office of "a priest of righteousness" on David, and Samuel passed the position on to David's sons. *This did not annul the Levitical Priesthood.*

But, the unknown author of the New Testament book *Hebrews* used the verse from Psalm 110 to do exactly the opposite. He wrote that the Levitical Priesthood established by the Torah was replaced by the Melchizedek Priesthood.

If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood, (for under it the people received the law,) what further need was there that another priest should rise after the order of Melchisedec (transliteration of the Greek word instead of Hebrew), and not be called after the order of Aaron? For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law. . . And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him:

"The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.'"

Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant. Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.¹¹

According to this unknown author, the Levitical Priesthood established by the Torah was replaced by the Melchizedek Priesthood and Jesus was its new High Priest. Two people, however, disagree with him – *Moses & Jesus.*

Moses: "Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land YAHWEH the ELOHIYM of your ancestors, is giving you. **Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it,** but keep the commands of YAHWEH your ELOHIYM that I give you."

Jesus: "Do not think that I have come **to abolish the Torah**¹² or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. Amen! I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the **YOD**¹³ (smallest Hebrew letter) or the smallest **decorative stroke** (tittle) will by any means disappear from the Torah until everything is accomplished.¹⁴

The author of *Hebrews* may have been influenced by something besides the Hebrew Scriptures that led to his conclusions above.

Although Melchizedek is mentioned only briefly (Gen. 14:18-20 and Psa. 110:4), this ancient personage received substantial attention from later commentators who recognized his special status as a priest-king (Philo, *Migra.*

235; *Leg. all.* 3.79-82; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.77-82). Among the DSS, an entire work is devoted to him (11QMelc); there he becomes a superhuman figure, who executes divine judgment. The text does not describe him as a priest, but he is described as having priestly functions (11QMelech 2:6). In rabbinic tradition, Melchizedek bestows the priesthood on Abraham, who becomes a "priest forever."¹⁵

The author of *Hebrews* includes an interesting comment that may also be linked to the later ideas about Melchizedek:

Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.¹⁶

In the apocryphal *2 Enoch*, Melchizedek is miraculously born from his dead mother, is a priest from birth, and is kept safe from the flood in order to be the priest in the post-flood generation.¹⁷ It is clear that these beliefs about Melchizedek developed long after the two verses of the Hebrew Bible were written. They appear to have been incorporated in Christianity during the early years of the transition from Jewish Christianity to Gentile Christianity. *Ultimately, the writings in Hebrews would make Melchizedek a key figure in separating the original Christianity from its Jewish roots.*

A defining doctrine of Gentile Christianity is that "Christians are not under the law." So, when questions are raised about whether "Christians should keep the laws of the Old Testament," the answers are usually a resounding "No!" But, that is not the case, when tithing is mentioned. Even though tithing in Christianity is often based on the verses from *Hebrews* below; its words are based on "the Law."

Now consider how great this man was, unto whom even the patriarch Abraham gave the tenth of the spoils. And verily they that are of the sons of Levi, who receive the office of the priesthood, **have a commandment to take tithes of the people** according to the law, that is, of their brethren, though they come out of the loins of Abraham. But he whose descent is not counted from them received tithes of Abraham, and blessed him that had the promises. And without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better. And here men that die receive tithes; but there he receiveth them, of whom it is witnessed that he liveth. And as I may so say, **Levi also, who receiveth tithes, payed tithes in Abraham.**¹⁸

Below is the common understanding of "Christian tithing," which is generally taught today in many churches:

When Abraham was blessed by Melchizedek and then gave Melchizedek a tenth of everything, a spiritual covenant was set up for our time, whereby humankind is to give a tenth of its increase (what a person receives that is his or hers) back to God (meaning the church).

How many billions of dollars have been given "tithed" over the past 1,900 years? The funny thing about this situation is the reversal of roles we find here. Jews are repeatedly accused of "being under the Law" by Christian, who declare they are "under grace." But when it comes to tithing, Christians are the ones "under the Law" -- **Jews do not tithe.** Below is a quote from a rabbi who was asked about tithing.

To pay the biblical tithe at this time, without Levites and Priests in their regular ordained offices and doing service in the Temple, would be "sin" both to the giver and the receiver. If we are to obey the law, **we cannot pay tithe unless we pay it to the ones ordained by God** to accept that tithe.¹⁹

Here is what "the Law" says about tithing and **who is to receive tithes:**

I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the tent of meeting. From now on the Israelites must not go near the tent of meeting, or they will bear the consequences of their sin and will die. It is the Levites who are to do the work at the tent of meeting and bear the responsibility for any offenses they commit against it. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. They will receive no inheritance among the Israelites. Instead, **I give to the Levites as their inheritance the tithes** that the Israelites present as an offering to the LORD. That is why I said concerning them: "They will have no inheritance among the Israelites."²⁰

Does this mean we shouldn't allocate a percentage of our incomes to help others? Of course we should – that is the lesson from the account of the king-priest of Salem and Abram -- but we should call it **TZEDAQAH** (righteousness), **not tithes**. **TZEDAQAH** is what Jesus said was required for one to enter into life eternal – *not tithes*. **BHC**

¹ Genesis 14:14-17

² Genesis 14:18-20

³ Genesis 14:14-23

⁴ Psalm 76:1-2

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem>

⁶ <http://www.cityof david.org.il/sites/all/themes/irdavid/assets/virtualTour/1.jpg>

⁷ *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* by William L. Holladay © 1971 by E. J. Brill, Leiden, Netherlands; p. 15.

⁸ Genesis 6:9

⁹ *Studies in Bereshit Genesis* by Nehama Leibowitz; Hemed Press, Jerusalem, Israel; pp. 132-132.

¹⁰ II Samuel 8:15-18

¹¹ Hebrews 7:11-12, 20-24

¹² Many English translations have *olawö* here.

¹³ Smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

¹⁴ Matthew 5:17-18

¹⁵ *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*; Amy-Jill Levine & Marc Zvi Brettler, Editors; © 2011 by Oxford Press, New York, NY; p. 415.

¹⁶ Hebrews 7:3

¹⁷ *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*; p. 414.

¹⁸ KJV Hebrews 7:4-9

¹⁹ <http://www.askelm.com/tithing/thi003.htm>

²⁰ Numbers 18:21-24

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