

WHO WAS MELCHIZEDEK AND WHO WAS HIS GOD?

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Melchizedek is mentioned only twice by name in the Old Testament, and yet, in the early years of the Christian era, he was the centre of considerable debate. A minor character, or so he seemed, was the focus of claims and counterclaims by Jews and Christians. Was he a priest or not? The Hebrew Bible describes him as a priest, (*kohen*, Gen 14.18), but the Targums avoid this term and say simply that he ‘served’ (*mešammeš*). This may have been anti-Christian polemic, denying the claim in Hebrews that Jesus was the great high priest like Melchizedek¹. But was this claim a Christian innovation? Hebrews assumes a fairly sophisticated knowledge of temple tradition, and so the question arises; what would readers of this text have expected of Melchizedek, given that he is introduced without any explanation into a temple text. Justin (*Trypho* 19) and Tertullian (*Against the Jews* 2) both claimed that Melchizedek was an uncircumcised priest, which meant that Christians could be priests without being circumcised, whereas the Jews claimed that he had been born circumcised (*Genesis Rabbah* XLIII.6).

Then there was the question of rank. The Christians claimed that Abraham *gave* a tithe to Melchizedek (Heb. 7.2-4), implying that Melchizedek was the greater, whereas the pre-Christian tradition as recorded in the *Genesis Apocryphon* says that Abraham *received* a tithe of the captured flocks from Melchizedek, implying that Abraham was the greater. The Hebrew text is ambiguous here, saying simply that ‘he received a tithe...’ but the most natural reading of the Hebrew is that Abraham *received* a tithe, that Abraham was the greater. This was disputed even as late as the time of Jerome, who died in 420CE. He recognised that this was delicate matter, because both the Hebrew and the Greek texts of Genesis could be read either way (Jerome, *Letter* 73.6). Why should the relative status of Abraham and Melchizedek have been important as late as the fifth century CE?

¹ G Vermes, ‘Haggadah in the Onqelos Targum’ in *Journal of Semitic Studies* 8 (1963) p 167.

Melchizedek was the centre of important claims about Christianity and its relationship to Judaism, especially to the temple and its priesthood. Priesthood was an important matter for the early Church – something that is often overlooked. The Christians claimed that Jesus was the Melchizedek priest, and in the first century C E, this would have entailed a claim to the original temple in Jerusalem. Josephus, who was presumably recording contemporary belief, said that Melchizedek was a Canaanite who had built the first temple in Jerusalem and was the first to serve there as a priest (*War* 6.438). Psalm 110 shows that the Davidic kings in Jerusalem retained the Melchizedek priesthood, which was rooted in the phase of Hebrew history represented by Abraham rather than by Moses. It is interesting here to observe that St Paul also emphasised that Christianity was rooted in the pre-Mosaic era of Hebrew history - in the promise given to Abraham long before the Law was given to Moses (Rom. 4). Even a surface reading of the Old Testament raises several questions: Melchizedek was linked to Abraham and to the monarchy, and in the second temple period, Moses took over the role of the Davidic king.² He was king, lawgiver, high priest and prophet' (Philo, *Life of Moses* II.292). We can only speculate how the two priesthoods related to each other; that of Aaron and that of Melchizedek. It was clearly a problem, as later developments in the tradition imply.

Claims to the authentic tradition were also, by implication, in dispute in the early years of Christianity. The Jews traced their teachings through the elders back to Moses, whereas the Christians claimed to have the mysteries of the Righteous One who was described by Isaiah. Thus in the Mishnah we find: 'Moses received the Law from Sinai, and committed it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets committed it to the men of the Great Synagogue' (*m. Aboth* 1.1). No mention of priests or temple. The Christians, however, claimed teaching from their great high priest, 'to whom the secret things of the Lord were committed' (Ignatius *Philadelphians* 9, also Clement *Miscellanies* 7.17). These secret things were the 'mystery' of the Righteous One mentioned in Isaiah 24.16, and were understood as the teachings of Jesus to be kept for the Lord and the sons of his house (*Miscellanies* 5.10, also *Clementine Homilies* 19.20). The *Isaiah Targum* understood the passage in the same way as

² The extract from Ezekiel's play quoted by Eusebius *Preparation* 2.9, and the reference in Philo *Life of Moses* I.158 show that Moses was depicted as one enthroned in the presence of God and named as God and King.

the Christians: the prophet saw the mystery associated with the Righteous One (*Tg. Isaiah* 24.16).

Then there is the question of the actual name Melchizedek; was it a name or a title? Josephus said Melchizedek was the name of the king who met Abraham, (*Antiquities* 1.10.1), and Philo knew Melchizedek as his name (e.g. *Allegorical Interpretation* III.82). In Genesis 14 and Psalm 110, however, Melchizedek is written as two words, suggesting that it was not a name but a title: Malki Zedek perhaps King of Righteousness or Righteous King. Maybe this was the figure who appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures as ‘the Righteous One’, for example the enigmatic passage in Isaiah 24 that we have just mentioned, or the Servant in Isaiah 53.11, or the expected King in Zechariah 9: ‘Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion... for your King comes to you, the Righteous One and Saviour... He will speak peace to the nations (Zech. 9.9-10, my translation). This is very similar to the Christian understanding of Melchizedek in Hebrews: ‘He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace (Heb. 7.2)³. The early Christians used ‘Righteous One’ as a title for Jesus (Acts 3.14).

The Melchizedek text from Qumran has the two word form, (11Q Melch. II line 9), and the Amran text from Qumran (4Q543-8) has another title formed in a similar way: Malki Reša‘, perhaps meaning King of Evil. He was an evil angel and so the counterpart of Malki Zedek, who would have been a comparable angel figure. The War Scroll describes the conflict between the Prince of Light and his people, and the prince of the Kingdom of Wickedness (QM XII, XVII), perhaps other titles for the same pair: Malki Zedek and Malki Reša‘. Angels with names similar to these appear in early Christian texts. The *Letter of Barnabas* contrasts the way of light and the way of darkness: ‘Between those two ways there is a vast difference, because over the one are posted the light bearing angels of God, and over the other the angels of Satan. One of these two is the Lord from all eternity to all eternity, and the other stands paramount over this present age.’ (*Barnabas* 18). In the *Book of Hermas* there are two angels struggling to influence a Christian: the Angel of righteousness who brought good thoughts and peace, and the Angel of

³ The prophecy in Dan 9.24 seems to describe the coming of eternal righteousness along with the anointing of the Most Holy One, but the text is not clear, and there is obvious confusion in the Greek versions.

wickedness who brought bitter thoughts and evil deeds (Hermas *Mandate* 6..2). Hermas is a Greek text, but one wonders what the titles of these angels might have been in the Semitic tongue of the first Christians? Melek, king, and mal'ak, angel, can sound very similar. Was the Angel of Righteousness, the Lord of all eternity who brought peace, Hermas' way of describing the mysterious Malki Zedek, the king of peace, the eternal priest? Some people did say that Melchizedek was an angel⁴. Origen had thought this, but Jerome disagreed with him, after consulting Jewish scholars (*Letter* 73.2)⁵. The Qumran texts, however, do show that Melchizedek was a divine figure, seeing in him the fulfilment of texts about God, and expecting him to appear in the tenth jubilee. This is exactly what the Daniel prophecy implies; after seventy weeks of years⁶, the Most Holy One would be anointed, and there would be everlasting righteousness (Daniel 9.24). The Righteous One was an important title, and understanding Melchizedek as a name may be obscuring something important. Denying that he was an angel may be the key to his significance.

The Christians claimed that Melchizedek was without father or mother or genealogy (Heb. 7.3), but the Jews said he was in fact Shem, son of Noah, who had thus survived the flood⁷. Giving him a genealogy emphasised that he was not an angel. The Enoch tradition has yet a third account of his origin. He was the great, great grandson of Enoch, Noah's nephew, who was born miraculously after the death of his father Nir, and survived the great flood because Gabriel took him to heaven (2 En. 70-73). What both the Jewish and the Enochic traditions are saying is that the Melchizedek priesthood was the priesthood of Enoch and the generation before the flood. The Book of Jubilees claims that many of the prescriptions of the Torah were far older than Moses, and had been given to Noah by his ancestors, the ancient priests (Jub. 7.34-9; 10.13). We cannot just dismiss this as fiction. *These are all claims to a more ancient religion than that of Moses, an ancient religion represented in the biblical texts by the figure of Melchizedek.* The link to the Enoch tradition has to be important, not least because the oldest 'history' of Jerusalem

⁴ See F L Horton *The Melchizedek Tradition. A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century AD and in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. 131-151

⁵ See also Epiphanius *Panarion* 2.50.7, who said that some considered Melchizedek to be 'by nature the Son of God who appeared to Abraham'

⁶ i.e. 490 years which are the same as ten jubilees.

⁷ Targum Pseudo Jonathan and Targum Neofiti to Gen 14.18; Leviticus Rabbah XXV.6.

in 1 Enoch has no place for Moses. The so-called *Apocalypse of Weeks* describes the law being given, but there is no mention of Egypt or the Exodus (1 En. 93.6). There was a vision of the holy and righteous and the law was given.

Who was this Melchizedek? This brief introductory survey shows that claims about him were disputed, and that the evidence is not always easy to evaluate. Earlier Jewish sources described him as a priest and a heavenly being, Christian texts say he was a priest and a heavenly being. Post Christian Jewish texts, however, say he was neither priest nor angel. The most likely explanation of this is the claims made for Jesus: that he was Melchizedek.

This Jewish-Christian debate is the context for discussing the various forms of the Melchizedek text in Genesis 14, but this cannot be done without considering also Psalm 110. First, we note that there are different forms extant of both the texts that mention Melchizedek *and of other texts relevant to the discussion* e.g. Deuteronomy 32.8 which describes the sons of God to whom the nations were allocated, and Deuteronomy 32.43 which described how the Lord emerges to atone the land. The Hebrew of Psalm 110 is notoriously difficult to translate, especially verse 3, where Yahweh makes someone a Melchizedek priest, but the process and the setting are obscured. The Greek text is a little clearer than the Hebrew: ‘In the glory of the holy ones... I have begotten you.’ To this translator, and so to the early Christians who used the Greek text, becoming the Melchizedek priest meant being born as the Son among the angels. In temple terms, this implies a ritual in the holy of holies, the place of the angels, in which the human became divine. The holy of holies represented the state of being that was both beyond and before the material creation, and this was where the Melchizedek priest was ‘born’. The rest of Psalm 110.3 has become opaque in the Hebrew, and we have to ask why this might have happened⁸. I suggest it was because this verse described the making of the ancient Melchizedek priests who were described as Sons of God.

⁸ Something similar occurred recently in the translation of the Qumran texts. The Messianic Rule looks forward to the time when God will father the Messiah, who will then preside at a meal of bread and wine (1QSa II). Some people could not believe what they were reading and so offered another translation that was published in a popular book and became the accepted reading for anyone who could not consult the original. Thus G Vermes *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, London: Penguin 1962, 1982, 1987, and then, in *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, London Penguin 1997, we read that God was Father of the Messiah: ‘This reading, which has been queried by many including myself, seems to be confirmed by computer enhancement’ p.159.

A similar fate has befallen the sons of God passage in Deuteronomy 32.8-9, where the Masoretic Hebrew says that the Most High divided up the nations of the world according to the number of the sons of Israel. The Qumran text, however, implies that the Most High allocated the nations of the world among the sons of God, not the sons of Israel, and that Jacob was given to Yahweh. In other words, Yahweh was a Son of the Most High, and he was appointed as the Guardian Angel of Jacob. I suggest that the opacities and variants in the Hebrew text here are due to a dispute over the nature of Yahweh: the older texts knew that Yahweh was a Son of the Most High, what Christians would call the Second Person. Psalm 110.3, a key text for Christians, describes the process by which the Davidic king became the Son, the process by which a human became Yahweh. Becoming divine was described as birth, but the Hebrew *yldtyk* is ambiguous, and is usually rendered in English as ‘your youth’⁹. The Greek translator, and thus too the early Christians, read the letters differently¹⁰ and understood it to mean ‘I have begotten you’, *exegénnēsá se*¹¹. The place of this birth is also unclear in the Hebrew: was it ‘in glorious array’, or was it ‘on the holy mountains.’ [Was it *b^ehadrey* or *b^ehar^erey*, as in Psalm 87.1?. The Greek and Latin, which reflect the Christian understanding of the verse, understood that the birth took place in the glory of the holy ones, that is, amidst the angel host in the holy of holies¹².]

Here in Psalm 110 we have to envisage Yahweh and the human king becoming One, such that Yahweh was present in the king: Immanuel. Sonship meant unity, not separation. ‘A priest like Melchizedek’ was the transformed human figure, an angel. This is a complex and fascinating line to pursue, but we do not have time here. It is the immediate background to the arguments in St John’s Gospel, for example, where Jesus, debating with the Jews, asks: ‘Do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world “You are blaspheming” because I said I am the Son of God?’ (John 10.36). The consecrated one was the high priest, consecrated in the holy of holies that represented heaven, and then sent out into the world. Using arguments that must have been acceptable to his Jewish critics, *Jesus said that the consecrated one was the Son.*

⁹ Reading *yalduteyka*

¹⁰ As *y^elidtika*

¹¹ Thus too Vg *genui te*.

¹² Greek *en tē lamprótēti tōn hagiōn* Vg *in splendoribus sanctorum*

‘Do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world “You are blaspheming” because I said I am the Son of God?’ He was the Melchizedek priest as described in Psalm 110.

The mysterious ‘dew’ in Psalm 110, apparently part of the birth process, does not appear in either the Greek or the Latin versions. It could have been the anointing oil, which is described elsewhere as ‘like dew’ (Ps 133.3)¹³ Or it could have been yet another corruption in the text. The Latin understood the line to mean that the Son was born *before* Lucifer, which raises interesting questions about the title ‘the firstborn’. Was the psalm affirming that the Davidic king was the firstborn as stated in Psalm 89.27 ‘I will appoint him the firstborn’, *b^ekor*, rather than Satan who claimed that he was born first and so should take precedence. In the Life of Adam and Eve Satan refused, for this reason, to worship the image of God (*Life of Adam and Eve* 14). ‘Let all God’s angels worship him’, was part of the longer form of that disputed verse Deuteronomy 32.43, the part that does not appear in the Masoretic Hebrew, although it was in the Qumran text. It was also one of the proof texts at the beginning of Hebrews to establish the identity of Jesus: he was Yahweh who came to atone the land, and all the angels were commanded to worship him. A human being united to Yahweh - being the Son - and union with the Father were the subjects of Jesus’ prayer for his disciples after the Last Supper: ‘that they may be one, even as we are one...’ (John 17.22). The Melchizedek verse in Psalm 110, I suggest, became obscure because of its importance for Christian claims about Jesus and about themselves. The Christians were, were, collectively, the restored Melchizedek priesthood: one with Jesus, and their unity with Him was both the sign of their true identity as sons of God (John 1.13; Romans 8.14) and also of Jesus’ divine origin. Melchizedek, then, was a priesthood of many people, not of just one individual.

What then of the Melchizedek passage in Genesis? Did it have a similar fate, because it was relevant to Jesus? The key verse, for our purposes, is Genesis 14.22: ‘I have sworn by Yahweh God Most High...’ Yahweh here is identified as God Most High, El Elyon, but this reading occurs *only in the Masoretic Hebrew text and the Targums based on it*. All the other ancient

¹³ See also 2 Enoch 22.9, where the oil that anoints and transforms Enoch into an angel is described as like sweet dew.

witnesses do not identify Yahweh and God Most High. Melchizedek's God is simply God Most High. In the Old Greek there is just God Most High¹⁴. The Genesis Apocryphon has only God Most High (1 Q20.22). Josephus says that Melchizedek was a priest of God - no detail (*Antiquities* 1.10). Jubilees has a gap in the text at the point where we expect Melchizedek¹⁵ Philo says that Melchizedek was high priest of the Most High God (*Abraham* 235), but in his Allegorical Interpretation he hints at other aspects of Melchizedek. He was priest and Logos, an identification *that he uses elsewhere for Yahweh when he appears in human form* as the angel of Yahweh. Thus when Moses and the elders ascended Sinai, said Philo, they saw the Logos (*Confusion of Tongues* 97); when Hagar ran away she met 'the angel or divine Logos' (*Cherubim* 3); Balaam met 'the armed angel, the Logos of God' (*Cherubim* 35). Philo's descriptions show that he thought of the Logos as the ancient royal high priest: in various places he describes him as 'high priest and king' (*On Flight* 118), for example, or as 'the high priest, his First Born, the Divine Logos' (*On Dreams* I.215). He had human form: 'God's Man, the Logos of the Eternal' (*Tongues* 41). One of the roles of the Logos was to keep the elements of creation apart and distinct: 'The Divine Logos stations himself to keep these elements apart' (*Planting* 10). We shall return to this role of the Logos as the separator. This appearance of Yahweh in human form, the high priest, king and maintainer of the creation, the Logos, was also Melchizedek. **Philo, who could make this identification, was contemporary with the Qumran text that identified Melchizedek as a divine figure.**

Philo knew that some people in his time were mistakenly confusing or conflating God Most High and the Logos. Those who could not look on the sun, he said, but were able to see only its gleam, were saying that this was the sun itself. 'So some regard the Image of God, his Angel the Logos, as his very Self' (*On Dreams* I.239). This suggests that the conflation of Yahweh and God Most High in the Hebrew text of Genesis 14 would have been condemned by Philo as an error.

¹⁴ Similarly in the Peshitta and early Christian writers: Justin, *Trypho* 33; Theophilus *Autolytus* 2.31; Tertullian *Against the Jews* 2; Clement *Miscellanies* 4.161.

¹⁵ Jubilees 13.25, of which O S Wintermute say in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. Charlesworth, vol. 2: 'There is an obvious lacuna in the text at this point.' Melchizedek is missing from the Ethiopic text, and also from the Syriac, which is otherwise extant for this portion.

Philo also says that Melchizedek brought out wine for Abraham, when he had expected the hospitality gift of water (*Allegorical Interpretation* III 82). When Jesus gave wine instead of the expected water at Cana, St John described this as the first manifestation of his glory (John 2.11). Jesus had given a Melchizedek 'sign.'

Jesus is presented in many places as Melchizedek, even where Melchizedek is not mentioned by name. Apart from the miracle of the wine at Cana, there is the incident in the synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus read from Isaiah 61, and declared: 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4.21). This passage in Isaiah was one of the key prophecies of the Qumran Melchizedek text, to which I shall return in a moment. We cannot be certain that the people of Nazareth knew about the expectations in the Melchizedek text, *nor can we assume they did not*. Jesus was proclaiming himself as Melchizedek, and his hearers were very angry: 'All in the synagogue were filled with wrath' (Luke 4.28).

Similarly, the Melchizedek text itself, such as remains of it, describes the events of the tenth jubilee, when the final great Day of Atonement was expected. St Mark summed up the teaching of Jesus as 'The time is fulfilled' - what time? - 'the Kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the Gospel.' Repent because the great Day of Atonement was at hand (Mark 1.11), and Melchizedek had come. Jesus was baptised and began his public ministry at exactly the time Melchizedek was expected to appear: in the first seven years of the tenth jubilee¹⁶. When Hebrews 7 identified Jesus as Melchizedek, this was not an isolated and unrepresentative description, an author casting around for some priesthood to claim for Jesus who was clearly not of the tribe of Levi.

The primary proclamation of the Christians was 'Jesus is Lord', and by this they meant that Jesus was Yahweh. He, like the ancient royal high priests, had been Immanuel, as Matthew said in his Gospel (Matthew 1.23). The earliest Christian reading of the Old Testament was unanimous in understanding that Jesus was the One who appeared to the patriarchs, that he was Yahweh. When Constantine had a great church built at Mamre early in the fourth century, it was because

¹⁶ See my book *The Great High Priest*, London: T&T Clark, 2003 pp 32-41

the Son of God had appeared there to Abraham, the incident recorded in Genesis 18.

Sozomenes, the fifth century church historian who was born in Palestine, said that the basilica had been built at Mamre because ‘He who, for the salvation of mankind was born of a virgin, there manifested himself to a godly man.’ (Sozomenes *History* 2.4). Jesus was the One who had appeared to Abraham at Mamre. Why, if Jesus was proclaimed as Yahweh, was he also identified as Melchizedek? The most obvious conclusion has to be that Melchizedek was a manifestation of Yahweh. The Melchizedek high priest was Yahweh in human form, and the name Yahweh has been shown to mean ‘he who causes to be’, that is, the Creator.¹⁷

Hebrews argues that Melchizedek represented a priesthood superior to that of Aaron, and this gave rise to many disputes between Jews and Christians; who gave tithes to whom? The Targums, as we have seen, did not call Melchizedek a priest, and Jewish interpretation was hostile to Melchizedek in the early Christian period. In the second century, Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha taught that Melchizedek had been the intended ancestor of the priesthood, but when he blessed Abraham before he blessed the Most High, (as it says in Gen. 14.19), the priesthood was taken from him and given to Abraham, through whom it passed to Levi and Aaron (*Leviticus Rabbah* XXV.6; also *Genesis Rabbah* XLIII.8). Others saw a happier relationship between Melchizedek and Abraham: ‘Melchizedek instructed Abraham in the laws of the priesthood, the bread alluding to the bread of the presence, and the wine to libations’ (*Genesis Rabbah* XLIII.6).

Hebrews shows what the first Christians believed about Melchizedek, and thus about Jesus. First, it is assumed throughout Hebrews that Son of God, Melchizedek and Lord, i.e. Yahweh, are identical. The first chapter of Hebrews shows that Jesus is the Son of God and thus greater than the ordinary angels because he bears the Name (Hebrews 1.4). It was the high priest who bore the Name, inscribed on the golden plate on his forehead. The priests in the temple were angels, as can be seen from the Qumran Sabbath Songs, and the high priest was their chief, the Lord of Hosts. According to Hebrews, Jesus fulfilled the prophecy in Deuteronomy 32.43, that

¹⁷ This was first proposed by Le Clerk in 1700, and developed by P Haupt ‘Der Name Yahweh’ in *Orientalische Literaturzeitung* 1909, cols 211-214, who proposed that *yhw* was a high ‘il form. This was taken up again by W F Albright ‘Contributions to Biblical Archaeology and Philology’, in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 43 (1924) pp. 363-933, and ‘Further Observations on the Name Yahweh’ in *JBL* 44 (1925), pp. 158-62.

when the Yahweh comes to atone the land, all the angels will worship him (Hebrews 1.6) - that key text where the current Hebrew is shorter than the Qumran text and the Old Greek, and so the link to Christian prophecy has been lost. It is also another point of contact with the Qumran Melchizedek text, since Melchizedek was expected to come and make the great atonement, rescuing his people from the powers of Belial.

The comparison between the priesthoods is worked out in greatest detail in Hebrews 7. First, Melchizedek was superior to Aaron because Aaron's ancestor paid tithes to him. Then the manner of entering the priesthoods is contrasted. Melchizedek does not descend from priestly ancestors, he does not become a priest through the death of his predecessor. He is raised up to priesthood, where the word 'raised up' can also mean resurrected: *anístasthai* in contrast to Aaron's heirs being named, *légesthai*. (Hebrews 7.11). The contrast is between the legal requirements of bodily descent and the power of an indestructible life, resurrection life (Hebrews 7.16). Melchizedek's was the priesthood of the resurrected, those who do not die, and so it was the eternal priesthood.

Jesus himself defined the relationship between the resurrected, the angels and the sons of God. When the Sadducees asked him about marriage in heaven, he replied: 'They cannot die any more, because they are equal to angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection (Luke 20.36). If Melchizedek was resurrected, he too was an angel and a son of God, which is what that opaque verse in Psalm 110 originally described. In the glory of the holy ones, the king was born as Son of God, as Melchizedek, that is, he was resurrected. I suggest that the context and content of this verse explains the state of the Hebrew text of the psalm, and that disputes about Melchizedek have left their mark in the transmission of the Hebrew text, both here and in Genesis. As a result, the meaning and significance of the Melchizedek priesthood are yet more of the plain and precious things that have been lost from the Masoretic text of the Old Testament.

Hebrews tells us more. Melchizedek had neither father nor mother nor genealogy, neither beginning nor end to his life, but made like (*aphōmoiōmenos*) the Son of God, he remains a priest for ever (Hebrews 7.3, my translation). He is the image of the Son of God. This was not a

piece of creative exegesis on the part of someone who needed to explain why Melchizedek had no genealogy. He was not *like* the Son of God, just because both shared the unusual feature of having no genealogy. He *was* the image of Yahweh, and so had no genealogy. The new priest, Jesus, was raised up in the likeness of Melchizedek, where ‘likeness’, *homoiótēta*, is clearly quoting Psalm 110.4, but not the Old Greek version. The familiar English translation is ‘a priest for ever *after the order of* Melchizedek’, but ‘after the order of’ is not in itself clear. The Old Greek has *katà tēn táxin*, which Hebrews uses four times (5.6; 6.20; 7.11,17), but the Peshitta here has *badmutah*, in the likeness, corresponding to *homoiótēta* of Hebrews 7.15.

What was ‘the likeness’, the way that the writer of Hebrews understood the difficult Hebrew ‘*al dibrathi*,?’ The Hebrew corresponding to the Syriac *dmurah* would be *d̥mut*, a word used often in the visions of Ezekiel who was a priest in the first temple (Ezekiel 1.3). It forms a pair with the word *mar’eh*, appearance, and seems to mean the invisible form that manifested itself in a particular way, its ‘appearance’. The distinction between the two words is best shown in the old English version, the Authorised Version of the Bible. Ezekiel 1.26 says that on the throne he saw ‘the likeness as the appearance of a man...’; and Ezekiel 1.28 says: this was the appearance of the likeness of the Glory of the Lord.’ The ‘likeness’, *d̥mut*, appeared in a certain way. Is this the original meaning of ‘after the order of Melchizedek?’ The king had become the *appearance* of the likeness of Melchizedek? This too suggests that Melchizedek was a heavenly being who could ‘appear’ in or as the king.

Immediately after meeting Melchizedek, according to Genesis, Abraham had a vision of the Lord Yahweh who commanded him to sacrifice a heifer, a she goat and a ram, a turtledove and a pigeon. He prepared the offerings, and then, at sunset, he fell into the deep sleep that was the prelude to visionary experience, *tardemah* (Gen.15.12). Yahweh then revealed to Abraham the future of his people and promised them the land (Gen.15.12-16). A longer version of this chapter appears in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, thought to be a Palestinian Jewish text from the second century CE¹⁸. Passages in the *Recognitions of Clement* show that this *Apocalypse* was

¹⁸ Dated to the ‘early centuries of the Common Era’ by A Kulik, *Retroverting Slavonic Pseudepigrapha. Toward the Original of the Apocalypse of Abraham*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005, p.2.

known to the early Church, but the heavenly figure who appears in the *Clementine Recognitions* is not called Yahweh. He is called the True Prophet and, significantly, the Righteous One¹⁹. In the *Apocalypse of Abraham* the figure is called Iaoel, that is Yahweh-El, which must be how 'the Lord Yahweh' of Genesis 15 was understood in the early years of the Christian era.

We have, therefore, various names for the figure who appears to Abraham: Genesis 15 says he was the Lord Yahweh, the *Apocalypse of Abraham* says he was Yahweh-El, and the *Clementine Recognitions* call him the Righteous One and the True Prophet. Neither Genesis nor the *Recognitions* describes the figure, but the *Apocalypse of Abraham* describes a high priest: the appearance of his body was like sapphire and the aspect of his face was like chrysolite, and the hair of his head like snow. And a kidaris (turban) was on his head, its look that of a rainbow, and the clothing of his garments was purple and a golden sceptre was in his right hand' (Ap. Abr 11.1-3)²⁰. The Apocalypse describes Yahweh-El as the high priest, appearing to Abraham immediately after the meeting with Melchizedek. I suspect that the writer of the Apocalypse knew that Yahweh-El was Melchizedek, just as the *Recognitions* call him the Righteous One. The Apocalypse also knew that Yahweh-El had the form of a man, that he was sent to strengthen and consecrate Abraham, (Ap. Abr 10.3-4), and that he was to be the guardian angel of Abraham's descendents (Ap. Abr. 10.16). His role was to restrain the heavenly powers and keep them apart (Ap. Abr 10.9), exactly what Philo had said of the Logos (*On Planting* 10). Ambrose, writing in Milan at the end of the fourth century CE, also knew that Melchizedek was the Lord. 'Can a man be king if righteousness when he himself can hardly be righteous? Or a king of peace when he can hardly be peaceable?... The sacrament you received is the gift not of man but of God, brought forth by him who blessed Abraham...' ²¹ Melchizedek here is the Lord, the Son of God, and Ambrose regarded the appearance of Melchizedek to Abraham as a theophany, just as contemporary Christians in Palestine knew that the Lord, the Son of God, had appeared to Abraham at Mamre.

¹⁹ *Clementine Recognitions* 1.32-4, which describes the true prophet appearing to Abraham and teaching him about the future, the nature of God and the judgement.

²⁰ Thus R Rubinkiewicz in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. Charlesworth, vol 1 p.694.

²¹ Ambrose *On the Mysteries* 8.46

Melchizedek, the Righteous king, represented the older priesthood. The Pentateuch depicts the time of Abraham as the remote past, but the purges in the time of Josiah show that the religion of the patriarchs was flourishing in the seventh century BCE²², and most of what Josiah removed were the religious practices of the patriarchs. The Moses traditions came to prominence only after that time, and with them, the Aaronite priesthood. Melchizedek and the first temple that he represented were eclipsed for centuries, but the tradition was not lost. The Melchizedek text seems to describe the people of Melchizedek whose teachers had been hidden and kept secret (11QMelch II line 5)²³, and, by implication, were about to reappear.

The Hebrew text of Genesis 14.22 was part of this debate about Melchizedek which began centuries before the time of Jesus and was given a new urgency by Christian belief that Jesus was Melchizedek, Yahweh, the Son of God Most High. By adding the name Yahweh to El Elyon, and thus making Melchizedek a priest of Yahweh El Elyon, the Hebrew form of the text effectively obscures the fact that Melchizedek was Yahweh, and thus denies the claim that Jesus, as Melchizedek, was the Lord.

²² First suggested by J van Seters 'The Religion of the Patriarchs in Genesis', *Biblica* 61 (1980), pp. 220-33, p.231.

²³ Thus *Discoveries in the Judean Desert XXIII* ed. Garcia Martinez and others, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 229