**THOUGHTS ON THE PARASHAH**

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**Melchizedek King of Salem**

After defeating the armies of Chedorlaomer and rescuing Lot from captivity, Abraham met the king of Sodom at the Valley of Shaveh (Genesis 14:17).  Readers of Scripture might expect the next verse to describe what happened at that meeting.  It does not.  The dialogue between Abraham and the king of Sodom resumes only when we reach 14:21.  Interrupting the flow of the text is a periscope, comprising verses 18-20, about Abraham’s encounter with a priest-king:  “And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High.  He blessed him, saying, ‘Blessed be Abram of God Most High Creator of heaven and earth.  And blessed be God Most High Who has delivered your foes into your hand.’  And he gave him a tenth of everything (14:18-20).”

This is the only unambiguous reference to Melchizedek in the entire Bible.  Many questions emerge.  Who was Melchizedek? Where is Salem?  Given the usual separation of royal and ecclesiastical offices, why did he function as both priest and king?  If he worshipped the same Deity as Abraham, why does the Jewish tradition hold that Abraham, living amidst an utterly polytheistic, pagan world, was the first person to discover the one true God?   Why is the Melchizedek tale situated where it is in the text, conspicuously breaking up a larger narrative?

All commentators and Aramaic translators agree that Salem means Jerusalem.  If that is so, we can identify the Valley of Shaveh with the Valley of Josaphat (Joel 3:2) or the Kidron Valley.  Josephus claimed that the original name of the location was Salem and was later changed to Jerusalem (Antiquities 1,10,2).  He was incorrect, as already in the eighteenth century BCE Egyptian texts refer to the city as Urushalimu.  Elsewhere in Scripture, Salem is an alternative name for Jerusalem, connoting a city of peace.  “Salem became his abode, Zion his den (Psalms 76:3).”  The prophets regarded Jerusalem as a city of justice and righteousness (Isaiah 1:21).  The pre-Israelite kings adopted theophoric names, appending “zedek,” or righteousness, to their titles (see Joshua 1:10).  The Midrash asserts that the essence of Jerusalem causes its inhabitants – including even the non-Israelites of deep antiquity – to be righteous (Genesis Rabbah 43).

In the Jewish tradition, the priests are responsible for cultic worship and religious instruction; kings wield executive and political power.  The two spheres of authority were intended to remain separate (I Samuel 2:35).  Nonetheless, Israelite kings made a habit out of encroaching on the prerogatives of the priesthood.  David wore an Ephod during the celebrations that accompanied the arrival of the ark to Jerusalem (II Samuel 6:14).  David’s sons, despite their Judahite lineage, served as “Kohanim” (II Samuel 8:18).  Solomon blessed the Israelites assembled for the Temple dedication and offered a myriad of sacrifices (I Kings 8:14, 63).  Uzziah attempted to arrogate unto himself the priestly task of offering incense (II Chronicles 16:18).  The Hasmoneans were priests who made themselves into a hereditary dynasty of kings, for which action they were only mildly chastised by the later rabbis.

We do not know whether the conjoined office of priest-king was common in Canaan or was specific to Salem.  One Critical Bible Studies view suggests that Genesis 14:18-20 was added by a later hand in seeking to justify the consolidation of spiritual and temporal leadership in Jewish society by appealing to an ancient precedent.

In the Second Temple and early post-Temple eras, wild theories about Melchizedek abounded.  Speculation was fueled in part by a plausible reading of Psalms 110:4, which speaks about a warrior king who will exact justice against the nations of the world: “You are a priest forever after the manner of Melchizedek.”  An alternative translation, preferred by JPS reads: “You are a priest forever, a rightful king by my decree.”  According to the latter rendering, the Psalmist’s wording does not intend to, and does not, implicate the priest-king mentioned in Genesis 14.

One of the Dead Sea Scrolls (Q11Melch) regards Melchizedek as an eschatological and soteriological figure.  He wages battle in heaven and executes judgment against evil.   Melchizedek is -- theologically dangerously -- called “Elohim.”  In the addendum to the Slavonic Book of Enoch, known as the Exaltation of Melchizedek (2EM), there is a description of Melchizedek’s miraculous virgin birth to the wife of Noah’s brother Nir.  The pseudepigraphic author describes Melchizedk’s being transported to the Garden of Eden, where he establishes a line of high priests who will exercise authority in messianic times.

In the New Testament, Melchizedek is a conceptual antecedent to Jesus. “So also Christ glorified not himself to be made high priest.  But he that said unto him, thou art my son, today I have begotten thee.  As he said also in another place, thou art priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:5-6).”  Jesus, like Melchizedek, is simultaneously priest, king, and messiah.  Both figures are unlike other mortals in the way they enter and exit the world, “without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days nor end of life (7:3).”

Rabbinic literature preserved some of the eschatological and fantastic legends about Melchizedek.  He is said to be one of the four smiths of Zechariah’s vision (2:3), together with Messiah son of David, Messiah son of Joseph, and Elijah (Sukkah 52a).  He was also born circumcised (Avot d’Rabbi Nathan 2).

The sages identified Melchizedek as Shem son of Noah (Seder Olam 21).  Some scholars have suggested that this interpretation of Scripture was propounded rather late, and that it served to counter Christian and Gnostic heresies.  However, it is far more likely that the rabbis identified Melchizedek with Shem because otherwise they could not account for the Bible’s mentioning a non-Israelitish priest who served God in Canaan during the Patriarchal period.  It does not comfofrtably fit Jewish doctrine that the only theologically correct people on earth are the Hebrew descendants of Abraham (Genesis Rabbah 42:8).  One solution, therefore, was to identify Melchizedek with a still living, virtuous ancestor of Abraham.

While certain rabbinic texts describe Abraham as a revolutionary figure in the history of world religion (Berakhot 7b), others portray the faith of the Hebrew forefathers as being an uninterrupted continuation of the original true faith of Adam.  The Midrash states that Adam functioned as high priest and offered a sacrifice while wearing the priestly vestments.  Adam passed on that status to Seth, followed by Methuselah, Noah, and Shem, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Bamidbar Rabbah 6).  The Talmud explains that Shem forfeited the high priesthood when he erred in blessing Abraham before blessing God.  Reading Scripture hyperliterally, the sages noted that the text says Shem was a priest to the God Most High, implying that Shem’s offspring were not (Nedarim 32b).  This neatly accounts for the permanent shift in sacerdotal functions from Noahides to Israelites.  Shem-Melchizedek is credited with facilitating a seamless transition by teaching Abraham the laws of the Showbread and libations as well as general instruction in Torah (Genesis Rabbah 43).

Evidence of the antiquity of the Melchizedek-Shem connection can be found in the oldest interpretations of Noah’s blessing to his two virtuous sons after they covered his nakedness.  The verse is conventionally translated: “May God enlarge Japeth and may he [Japeth] reside in the tents of Shem (Genesis 9:27).”  However, both the Book of Jubilees (7:12) and Onkelos understand the verse to mean “God shall enlarge Japheth and He [God] shall rest His Presence in the tents of Shem.”  Identifying Melchizedek with Shem results in the fulfillment of Noah’s blessing.

Various medieval commentators offered theories concerning the appearance of the Melchizedek episode in Scripture and its placement in the middle of the Sodom narrative.  Rashi, citing Midrash Rabbah, explains that the kings of the world met at the Valley of Shaveh and sought to elevate the victorious warrior-chieftain Abraham to a god-like status.  By paying homage to the priest of the God Most High, Abraham was, in effect, renouncing the exalted status proposed for him and reasserting God’s supremacy in the world.  Rashbam and Hizkuni note that Scripture had to report Melchizedek’s giving of bread and wine to Abraham.  It proved that Abraham was honest in claiming to the king of Sodom that he did not eat from the spoils of war, receiving his sustenance instead from the priest-king of Salem.  Ramban suggests that the Bible is here explaining the religious legitimacy of Abraham’s paying the customary tithe.  Had the king of Salem been a heathen, Abraham would not have remitted the tithe.  Since the king was a worshipper of the true God, Abraham instead was comfortable in making that payment.

Rambam notes that Genesis 14:18-20 foreshadows the Israelites’ later remitting tithes, making heave-offerings, and reciting blessings to God in the Temple of Jerusalem.  Critical scholars might suggest that the Melchizedek pericope was included in Scripture to bolster the legitimacy of the Davidic line’s assertion that Jerusalem should be the temporal and spiritual capital of Israel.  With no other reference to Jerusalem in the Pentateuch, Genesis 14:18-20 might have been helpful against the claims of the Northern Kingdom or later Samaritans who rejected the “chosen-ness” of Jerusalem.

Lastly, the Melchizedek pericope may have served to solidify Jewish claims over the Land of Canaan.  If Melchizedek is  Shem, the ruler of Jerusalem, that would mean that the Land of Canaan was given to the Semites when, after the Flood, the world was divided among Noah’s sons.  Canaan was the son of Ham.  The presence of his descendants in the “Land of Canaan” must have come about through illegitimate dispossession of the Semites.  The Book of Jubilees describes that very scenario.  Ham berated his son for stealing land. “Dwell not in the land of Shem, for to Shem and to his sons did it come by their lot (10:28-34).”

Genesis 14:18-20 does not seem to fit within the patriarchal narratives, certainly not when read plainly.  This intellectual challenge was exacerbated by the wild and doctrinally unacceptable Melchizedek tales spun by the sectarians.  The rabbis’ response was to offer a reading of the Melchizedek pericope that was, on a relative basis, theologically safe.