

Who is Melchizedek?

In Genesis 14, readers encounter Melchizedek, the King of Salem and priest of “the Most High God.” Abram responds by accepting a blessing from this king/priest and paying a tithe in recognition of his superiority. This enigmatic figure shows up two other places in the Bible, Psalms and Hebrews, where Melchizedek is a typology for the idealized Messianic king and Christ himself. How did Melchizedek go from a pagan priest-king to a forerunner of the Messiah?

Old Testament

Gen. 14:18ff –

- King of Salem
- Priest of “God Most High” – *el elyon* (Canaanite deity)
- Pronounces blessing on Abram by “God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth”
- Blesses “God Most High” for defeating enemies
- Abram gives a tenth of the war spoils
- Abram swears using different name – *el yhwh* followed by *el elyon*

Psalms 110:4 –

- A messianic psalm celebrating the coronation of the ideal priest-king
- Referred to repeatedly in the New Testament as Christ
- King given priestly status in “the order of Melchizedek” (v.4)
- Merging of kingship duties - war, judgment – and priestly duties – “a priest forever”
- Some translators see a reference to priest-king figure as supernatural in v.3 (“like the *Day Star, son of Dawn*, I have begotten thee” – a reference to Isa. 14:12)

Intertestamental Period

Hasmonean Dynasty (163 – 63 BCE)

- Rebelling against Hellenist rulers, a priestly family leads a revolt to restore Jewish rule and religious hegemony (as told in 1 Maccabees)
- After successfully establishing (limited) Jewish independence, family names themselves high priests AND kings, merging the roles by appealing to example of Melchizedek

Other Period Literature –

- Melchizedek explicitly given heavenly attributes to explain the presence of a non-Levitical priest
Dead Sea Scrolls – becomes an angelic figure (Michael – “Prince of Light”) who judges the unbelieving world and delivers “sons of light”
- ***2nd Enoch*** – expands on heavenly mythology of Melchizedek via birth story in days of Noah
 - Has no father or mother, springs from his mother’s womb fully developed and clothed with “the badge of priesthood” on his chest; speaks and blesses the Lord
 - Carried away to heaven to escape Noah’s Flood
- ***Philo of Alexander*** – identifies Melchizedek with the eternal “Logos” (cf. with John 1)

New Testament

Hebrews Ch. 7 –

- Uses some of the Intertestamental speculation on Melchizedek to elevate Christ (not endorsing these views however)
- Largely an exposition of Psalm 110
- Titles explicitly translated the same as other 1st c. Jewish sources (Josephus and Philo Judeas)
- Writer uses Melchizedek to make 3 points to show superiority of Jesus to Abraham –
 - Melchizedek’s lack of genealogy (v.3) suggests immortality (basis of priesthood is indestructible life)
 - Melchizedek’s reception of tithes (vv.9-10) show he is superior to Abraham (and his Levitical descendants)
 - Blessing of Abraham by Melchizedek demonstrates his superiority (inferior receives blessing)
 - Jesus, being “of the order of Melchizedek” is therefore of a superior priesthood than the Levites

Picture of Melchizedek as eternal, co-existent with Christ led to various heresies in Early Church including a sect that held Melchizedek as equal or superior to Christ