

Saturday February 20th: Melchizedek: [Genesis 14 v 18-20](#); [Psalm 110 v 4](#); [Hebrews 7 v 1-22](#): 'You are a priest for ever'



Jerusalem

Melchizedek is a figure that we know almost nothing about – and that, as we shall see, is actually the point. In the three verses in Genesis 14 that describe his encounter with Abraham we learn that he is king of Jerusalem, referred to here as 'Salem', which at the time in which this story is set was a Canaanite city.

On a visit to Jerusalem some years ago I went to have a look at the somewhat controversial archaeological excavations taking place underneath the Palestinian township of Silwan funded by an association called Elad, one of whose aims is to move Jewish settlers into the neighbourhood. These have uncovered not only the city that King David built in the 10th century BC but also the remains of a sizeable Canaanite fortress dating back to the 18th century BC, a reminder that Jerusalem has a history stretching back many centuries before David captured it and made it his

capital (2 Samuel 5 v 6-10).

Melchizedek is described as a priest of 'God Most High' (El Elyon) rather than Yahweh, Israel's God. Melchizedek is neither Jewish nor does he worship Israel's God. His name means 'king of righteousness' and it is significant by submitting to his blessing and offering him a tenth of his booty (from his recent raid on those who were holding his nephew Lot as a prisoner - see Gen 14 v 1-17), Abraham is implicitly acknowledging the validity of both his kingship and priesthood.

The writer to the Hebrews makes the most of the fact that we know so little about Melchizedek. He uses the reference in Psalm 100 v 4 to the Messiah being '...a priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek' as a bridge to link Jesus with this mysterious king and priest. To be a priest in the Jewish nation you had to be descended from the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron – it was your family tree that validated your priesthood. But even though we don't know who Melchizedek's ancestors were (Heb 7 v 6) or how he came to be a priest king, Abraham seems happy to acknowledge him as his peer (v 7).

The point that the writer to the Hebrews wants to communicate is that the priesthood of Jesus does not depend on his family background. In his lifetime it was still only members of the Levite tribe who had authority to act as priests in the Temple in Jerusalem (10v 11) as they were still doing when Hebrews was written (probably a few years before its destruction in 70 AD). Jesus was actually a member of the royal tribe of Judah (v 14) which begged the question as to how he could be a priest. He sees in the unknown figure of Melchizedek, who makes such fleeting appearance in the Old Testament, the one who points to the real nature of Jesus' priesthood. Whilst Melchizedek obviously had a family background we have no idea whether his priesthood was in any way hereditary. It is the silence about this in the few verses in which he makes an appearance in the Old Testament that is crucial to the writer. It is the fact that he is just there, appearing from nowhere and having his priesthood acknowledged by no less a person than Abraham that offers an illustration (and it is no more than that) of the kind of priesthood Jesus exercises.

So whilst Jesus isn't a Levite, he can be a priest of the order of Melchizedek (Heb 6 v 6) because that kind of priesthood doesn't need to be validated by a family tree. This gives him the freedom to achieve something beyond the abilities of any priest who served in the Temple; which is to give his own life for the sin of the world (Heb 7 v 3).

The unknown author of Hebrews argues that the endless sacrifices that lay at the heart of Jewish religious life were a bit weak and useless (v 16), didn't work (v 18) and have become obsolete (Heb 8 v 13) which is pretty strong language given that much of the Old Testament revolves around the sacrificial system! But this new High Priest, one who like Melchizedek relies on his own greatness rather than who he was descended from, has once and for all become a great high priest, dying on the cross for the sins of the whole world and passing into heaven (Hebrews 4 v 14).

So where does this take us? One thing that the writer to the Hebrews points out is that Melchizedek was king of 'Salem' (Heb 7 v 2) which he associates with the word 'Shalom' meaning peace. So in Melchizedek the writer of Hebrews identifies someone who by being both king and priest and with a name speaking of peace points to Jesus. What Jesus has done as king and priest is to bring peace between us and God by taking our sins upon himself. This is not because of any sense that he has changed God's mind; that God was angry with us but isn't any more because of Jesus' sacrifice. Appeasing the wrath of the gods by throwing them a victim is something more akin to pagan rituals and Jesus came to do away with that sort of thing. What Jesus does, by his death and resurrection, is to take into himself the totality of the sin, suffering, sense of alienation and hurt that fracture our vision of God and our relationship with him and assure us that God does, and always has, loved us more than we could ever know. As the song puts it, 'peace, perfect peace, is the gift of Christ our Lord'.

Whilst some of this may seem a bit dense and somewhat obscure, the bottom line is that Jesus' authority does not depend on any human institution but comes directly from God. This is why we can, in a way beyond even the many heroes of scripture listed later in Hebrews (11 v 40), prayerfully put our faith in him, even or especially in the kind of painful situations that the recipients of the letter, under the cosh for their faith, found themselves in. So, in the words of the writer, 'Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (12 v 2).

Questions: What do you understand by the phrase, 'Jesus died for our sins?' What difference does the fact that God loves you enough to send Jesus make to the way you live your life?

Prayer: Lord, peace is your gift to us in Jesus, help us to worship and share his peace in our daily lives. Amen.