July 30, 2017 “(It Really Isn’t About) Melchizedek” Rev. Patricia Weatherwax

Hebrews 7-10, Specifically: Hebrews 7:1-11 New Living Translation

“This Melchizedek was king of the city of Salem and also a priest of God Most High. When Abraham was returning home after winning a great battle against the kings, Melchizedek met him and blessed him.Then Abraham took a tenth of all he had captured in battle and gave it to Melchizedek. The name Melchizedek means “king of justice,” and king of Salem means “king of peace.” There is no record of his father or mother or any of his ancestors—no beginning or end to his life. He remains a priest forever, resembling the Son of God.

Consider then how great this Melchizedek was. Even Abraham, the great patriarch of Israel, recognized this by giving him a tenth of what he had taken in battle. Now the law of Moses required that the priests, who are descendants of Levi, must collect a tithe from the rest of the people of Israel, who are also descendants of Abraham. But Melchizedek, who was not a descendant of Levi, collected a tenth from Abraham. And Melchizedek placed a blessing upon Abraham, the one who had already received the promises of God. And without question, the person who has the power to give a blessing is greater than the one who is blessed.

The priests who collect tithes are men who die, so Melchizedek is greater than they are, because we are told that he lives on. In addition, we might even say that these Levites—the ones who collect the tithe—paid a tithe to Melchizedek when their ancestor Abraham paid a tithe to him. For although Levi wasn’t born yet, the seed from which he came was in Abraham’s body when Melchizedek collected the tithe from him.

So if the priesthood of Levi, on which the law was based, could have achieved the perfection God intended, why did God need to establish a different priesthood, with a priest in the order of Melchizedek instead of the order of Levi and Aaron?” The Word of the LORD. Thanks be to God.

 **INTRODUCTION**

Has anyone tried to do the little crossword on the bulletin cover? If and when you do, you will find the first thing to learn- there is more than one way to spell Melchizedek! Sometimes there are more i’s than e’s. The original spelling was in Hebrew, which isn’t anything like our alphabet, so spelling translation can’t be an exact letter for letter science. Plus the original Hebrew technically only has consonants, and the vowels were implied and then added later. So the puzzle is a reminder that some of this is puzzling.

Technically the name we are considering is Malki-Tzedek- king of righteousness, or king of justice. Or, it might be referring to a Canaanite God, Zedek, “my king is Zedek”. Yipes! So we can spell it a variety of ways, and understand that there’s a lot we don’t know about the name and what it means, or even who it was for sure.

Also, for our guests, we have been doing a sporadic study of the Biblical book that we call Hebrews, so this reflection is quite out of context. We’ve examined the first 6 chapters off and on this year, on the irregular Sundays when I’m in the pulpit. Hebrews is a bit different than most of the other letters in our Bible. That’s because it’s probably not a letter, what we call “an epistle” at all, but rather a sermon manuscript or transcript. It probably should be called “The Sermon to Some People, Probably of Hebrew Ancestry Who Were Exploring Christianity and Discouraged”. We don’t know for sure who wrote it or who heard it, but today we will learn a little more about the composition, and the several chapters in the middle of the sermon that speak about Melchizedek. We ignored him in Hebrews chapters 5 and 6 because the references were just sermon teasers, “coming attractions”, name-dropping snuck into the sermon as a preview of things to come.

So what do we know about Mel? We first hear about him in the Hebrew Bible, way back with father Abraham, in Genesis.

**THE GENESIS ACCOUNT:**

Basically, there was a battle between 2 groups of allied nations. Abram, who later gets renamed Abraham, demonstrated some awesome leadership skills and with his allies defeated a group of unsavory kings. They plundered a lot of stuff, basically taking back what had initially been taken from them, and freed Abram’s relative Lot, who had been kidnapped! Then we read in Genesis 14:18-20:

“And Melchizedek, the king of Salem and a priest of God Most High, brought Abram some bread and wine. Melchizedek blessed Abram with this blessing:

 “Blessed be Abram by God Most High,

 Creator of heaven and earth.

And blessed be God Most High,

 who has defeated your enemies for you.”

Then Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of all the goods he had recovered.”

That’s the extent of it. We get a bit more when he’s mentioned again, in Psalm 110:4:
 “The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek’.”

You have just heard all we find in the Old Testament about Melchizedek. So how does the book of Hebrews know so much to say so much? Where did all this honor for Mel come from? There’s more!

**THE EXTRA-CANONICAL INFO**

Melissa Bane Sevier, (pronounced like Severe) who was here in June for the Synod Gathering does a nice one page synopsis of Mel on page 14 of the 2018 Presbyterian Women’s Bible Study: “*Cloud of Witnesses*: *The Community of Christ in Hebrews*”. I think you will like this study. She writes:

Without a doubt, there were additional oral and written traditions at the time of the writing of Hebrews that were not preserved-- Jewish and Christian sermons, rabbinical writings, and others. It’s probable that some of these sources influenced our author, and he then added his unique perspective to the tradition surrounding Melchizedek.

 There’s stuff we don’t have, and also some found fairly recently, compared to most of our Bible. Between 1947 and 1956, roughly 870 documents were discovered in eleven caves in and around the Wadi Qumran (on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea) in the West Bank of Israel. The scrolls contained the only known surviving copies of the Old Testament composed before 100 AD, making them the oldest copies of the Hebrew Bible to date. These documents became known as the Dead Sea scrolls. It’s a fun trip on the internet to track these ancient sources down. The most helpful to understanding the passages in Hebrews is T*he Melchizedek document,* a fragment of a manuscript among the [Dead Sea Scrolls](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Sea_Scrolls). It describes [Melchizedek](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melchizedek#In_the_Dead_Sea_Scroll_11Q13) as leader of God's angels in a [war in Heaven](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_in_Heaven) against the angels of darkness, instead of the more familiar [Archangel Michael](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_%28archangel%29). The Dead Sea Scrolls contain texts in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. This particular scroll fragment is written in Hebrew, and the date of composition is around 100 BCE--about 100 years before the time of Christ. (From Wikipedia, ♥).

There’s also a significant account of Mel’s life story in a non-canonical book called Second Enoch. There are a significant number of documents that the early Church leadership did not feel met the criteria to be considered appropriately inspired for the Holy Bible. Some, like 2 Enoch, are called *pseudepigrapha* which typically refers to an assorted collection of Jewish religious works thought to be written *c* 300 BC to 300 AD, and usually attributed to someone long dead, like Enoch. They are separate writings from the [Apocrypha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apocrypha)l texts, which are included in some Bibles. Plenty of these writings exist, separate from our Bible. That helps explain some of the gaps and isolated characters, like Mel.

Just an aside, there are also references to Mel in the Book of Mormon. The Mormon prophet Alma said of him, "Now, there were many [high priests] before him, and also there were many afterwards, but none were greater" than Mel. ([Alma 13:19](http://lds.org/scriptures/bofm/alma/13.19?lang=eng#18))

So we understand, there’s background that we don’t have or that we don’t use. And verses 3 and 8 in Hebrews 7 give us a hint to the dilemma Mel causes to the early Christians.

“There is no record of his father or mother or any of his ancestors—no beginning or end to his life. He remains a priest forever, resembling the Son of God.” (and) “The priests who collect tithes are men who die, so Melchizedek is greater than they are, because we are told that he lives on.”

So there were some who believed, when Jesus came along, with the narrative that he was born of a virgin, and rose from the tomb, that Jesus was really Mel re-incarnated. More yipes.

**The Gospel Reference**

In which gospel is Melchizedek compared to Jesus? Not a trick question. Or maybe it is. There are no direct references to Mel in the New Testament except in Hebrews. It appears then, that this Hebrews sermon manuscript was especially directed to the people who had been in the Qumran community with a strong Mel tradition already in place. What we must remember is that we do not know everything about this era. Even thought we have a lot of ancient documents, we do not have copies of *everything* written or spoken.

Scrolls and scribes, and especially oral traditions- people telling other people stuff, are half a world and two thousand years away from Google search engines and internet access with our literal world-wide-web. We know what’s happening around the world and have nearly limitless access to scholarship and documents. The world at the beginning of our Common Era, like what we’d call 1 A.D., was incredibly isolated. If they wanted to *read* about Mel, and knew how to read, they had to find a specific scroll hidden in a specific cave, probably without any card catalog. I sat on my couch with my laptop and had the text of the *Dead Sea Scrolls* translated into English, in front of me, in seconds.

But just because Mel isn’t mentioned in Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, that doesn’t mean we don’t have a strong gospel message when speaking about him.

We have a beautiful document called Hebrews as part of our Bible. Its aim is to point to Jesus as the unique and superior high priest, with the effect of a new hope and a new covenant sealed with the blood of Christ the Lamb, a new agreement between God and people. Hear these words from later in Hebrews 7:

Yes, the old requirement about the priesthood was set aside because it was weak and useless. For the law never made anything perfect. But now we have confidence in a better hope, through which we draw near to God. … Because Jesus lives forever, his priesthood lasts forever. Therefore he is able, once and forever, to save those who come to God through him. He lives forever to intercede with God on their behalf. (7:18-19 and 7:24-25)

This is the gospel of our LORD, Jesus Christ.

**The Sermon to the Hebrews**

I used a phrase last week: “What the scriptures intend to teach us.” This lengthy part of Hebrews, about Mel, intends to ensure we understand a connection that goes go straight to the gospel message. I couldn’t read all these chapters today, but hear these words from chapter 9, verse 1 and 12:

So Christ has now become the High Priest over all the good things that have come. He has entered that greater, more perfect Tabernacle in heaven, which was not made by human hands and is not part of this created world. **…** With his own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever.

It really isn’t about Melchizedek.

Here is the main point of all of Hebrews, and the New Living Translation even says it that way!

**8:1** Here is the main point: We have a High Priest who sat down in the place of honor beside the throne of the majestic God in heaven.

The gospel of John (3:16) says the same “main point”. We’ve been using the New Living Translation because it lessens the linguistic stressors of Hebrews and John.

“For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

 Hebrews? It really isn’t about Melchizedek, at all. Thanks be to God. Amen.