

Genesis 14:17-24

Abram and the Two Kings

As we have been studying Genesis, we have learned a great deal, but there have also been many questions we have not been able to answer. That is because the Bible is the account of salvation and not a history of the world. However, since it is the history of salvation, God has written His narrative in such a way that it unfolds before us clearly and intentionally.

As God progressively revealed His plan of salvation, one method He used was to present certain people, practices, or ceremonies that foreshadowed future people or events. These are called ‘types’ and ‘antitypes’ are their counterparts in fulfillment. One example of his is the bronze serpent.

“⁶The Lord sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷So the people came to Moses and said, ‘we have sinned, because we have spoken against the Lord and you; intercede with the Lord, that He may remove the serpents from us.’ And Moses interceded for the people. ⁸Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘make a fiery serpent, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live.’ ⁹And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.” (Numbers 21:6-9).

The bronze serpent was a type of Christ being lifted on the cross during His crucifixion.

Another was the Passover lamb.

“³Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, ‘on the tenth of this month they are each one to take a lamb for themselves, according to their fathers’ households, a lamb for each household. ⁴Now if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his neighbor nearest to his house are to take one according to the number of persons in them; according to what each man should eat, you are to divide the lamb. ⁵Your lamb shall be an unblemished male a year old; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of the same month, then the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel is to kill it at twilight.” (Exodus 12:3-6).

The Passover lamb was again, a type of of Christ, the Lamb of God sacrificed for the sins of fallen humanity. And in this passage we will see another type, in one of the two kings Abram encountered on his return from battle, Melchizedek. When considering types, it is not necessary that Melchizedek and Christ share all of their characteristics. There is no compelling argument that Melchizedek be the pre-Incarnate Christ. Rather, he was a real, historical figure who represented a type of Christ.

The Setting

As the certainly weary, perhaps wounded, but no doubt exultant, warriors returned home, they were greeted by a group of men led by the previously king of Sodom. “Then after his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the valley of Shaveh (that is, the King’s Valley)” (v. 17). The king of Sodom had led the rebellion against Chedorlaomer, but when he had been defeated he fled into the tar pits in the valley of Siddim. Having

thereby escaped the armies led by Chedorlaomer, the king of Sodom now led a group out to greet the victorious Abram.

The king of Sodom encountered Abram and his allies in the valley of Shaveh, or the King's valley. This valley was located at the convergence of the valley of Hinnom and the Kidron valley, just east of Jerusalem. The location indicates that the king of Sodom was willing to journey a great deal north to meet Abram (perhaps as far as sixty or seventy miles). It also allowed for the King of Salem to find his way into the narrative.

The King of Salem

As the King of Sodom and Abram met, "Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High" (v. 18). Though bread and wine are easily associated with the modern Christian celebration of the Lord's Supper, we need not make too much of the elements of the feast. The bread and wine did not necessarily have symbolic significance, they may very well have simply been refreshment to the tired and hungry warriors.

We can also notice that it is only Abram who is honored. Neither his men, nor his allies from Elam receive any recognition. This is, after all, God's salvation story, and that story unfolded, at this point in history, through the life of Abram.

What we know of Melchizedek is that his name, *Malkî-šedek*, means "king of righteousness" (Hebrews 7:2). It can also be translated "my king is just" or "my king is legitimate" as a descriptive name. Melchizedek was king of Salem, *melek šālēm*, which means "King of peace" (Hebrews 7:2). The combination of the concepts of righteousness and peace are frequent in the Old Testament. Consider, "Lovingkindness and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other (Psalm 85:10).

"There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace,
On the throne of David and over his kingdom,
To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness
From then on and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this" (Isaiah 9:7).

Salem was an early name for Jerusalem.

¹God is known in Judah;
His name is great in Israel.
²His tabernacle is in Salem;
His dwelling place also is in Zion" (Psalm 76:1-2).

Though this passage connects Salem with Zion, which has biblical resonances with the heart of Israel, linguistically we can note that the Hebrew prefix for Jerusalem, *y^eru*, is similar to the Akkadian and Sumerian word for city, *uru*. It is likely that Salem was an early trading post of the Sumerians and Akkadians and later evolved into the city where Melchizedek ruled.

But in addition to being a king, Melchizedek was also a priest. This is the first mention of the office of priest in Scripture. And Melchizedek was a priest of God Most High, that is *Ēl Elyôn*. The concept of a priest-king was not alien in the ancient world, in fact even Abram, considered a king by his contemporaries (Genesis 23:6), performed such priestly ceremonial tasks as building an altar, offering sacrifices, and performing circumcision.

So, then, who is this god, of whom Melchizedek is the priest. Many have suggested that this is a Canaanite deity. The name *Ēl* is a common form of god in ancient Mesopotamian cultures, and the Canaanite pantheon did have a god *Ēl* who had a grandson named *Ēl Elyôn*. However, this viewpoint requires Melchizedek to combine the two deities, which seems unlikely for a priest. Also, Melchizedek identifies Abram with *Ēl Elyôn* in his blessing (v. 19) and Abram claims allegiance to the god *Ēl Elyôn*, “Abram said to the king of Sodom, ‘I have sworn to the Lord God Most High’” (v. 22). It is impossible to believe that Abram worshipped a Canaanite God at this point in his life. Therefore, *Ēl Elyôn* is the God of Israel, Who revealed Himself to Melchizedek as the God Most High.

Coming upon the group, Melchizedek blessed Abram. ¹⁹“He blessed him and said,
“Blessed be Abram of God Most High,
Possessor of heaven and earth;
²⁰And blessed be God Most High,
Who has delivered your enemies into your hand” (v. 19-20).

Note that Melchizedek blessed both Abram and his God. He recognized God as both Creator and Deliverer in his blessing. By describing God as the Creator, *qōnēh*, Melchizedek described God as both the maker and possessor of all. He also acknowledged the true source of Abram’s victory in his blessing. It was not Abram’s leadership, nor his strategy that won the day. *Ēl Elyôn* had chosen to give Abram’s enemies into his hand.

But if the God Whom Melchizedek invoked in his blessing is the God of the Hebrews, then the reader must wonder why a Canaanite king would invoke such a deity. It seems that this Canaanite king had been chosen by God to receive revelation that Abram’s God was indeed the Creator God. Abram graciously accepted the blessing, and also clarified it when speaking to the king of Sodom, “I have sworn to the Lord God Most High” (v.22). Abram’s God was not only the God Most High, He was also *Yahweh*.

The natural motive for this benediction by Melchizedek is that Abram had driven out the invading kings and brought some sense of peace to the region in which, let us not forget, Melchizedek was a king. Abram responded as a man of faith. “He gave him a tenth of all” (v. 20). Though the text is not specific as to who gave a tenth to whom, the context and grammar are strongly in favor of Abram being the one who gave the tithe. This fits the later expectation of giving a tenth to the Levites, the priests of Israel. (Numbers 18:21-28).

But this is not a tax, or obligation paid as a result of compulsion. It was rather a common division of the spoils of war between combatants and other supporters. This, too, would become commonplace among the people of Israel.

“²⁵Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ²⁶‘you and Eleazar the priest and the heads of the fathers’ households of the congregation take a count of the booty that was captured, both of man and of animal; ²⁷and divide the booty between the warriors who went out to battle and all the congregation’” (Numbers 31:25-27).

The King of Sodom

The interaction between Abram and the king of Sodom provides two contrasts in this narrative. Here, the welcome of the king of Sodom is contrasted with that of the king of Salem, Melchizedek. The king of Salem brought out food and offered a blessings. The king of Sodom came out to meet Abram, but his purpose was not to celebrate the achievements of the returning hero, but rather to make sure he got what he believed was his share of the spoils of war. The first words of the king of Salem was “blessed,” and the first words of the King of Sodom was “give me.”

The second contrast is that the selfishness of the king of Sodom is juxtaposed against the graciousness of Abram. The king of Sodom bargained for some of the booty, though he had not been at the battle. Displaying a different attitude, Abram generously chose to give the king of Salem one-tenth of the booty though he also had played no role.

To be fair, the king of Sodom demanded no more than what he considered his fair share of the spoils. He did not intend to rob Abram or take from Abram what he believed Abram deserved for his role in the battle. “The king of Sodom said to Abram, ‘give the people to me and take the goods for yourself’” (v. 21). The king of Sodom only asked for the people under his dominion that were taken as hostages to be returned. The other tangible spoils of war were to remain with Abram.

But Abram declined the offer. Abram had gained sufficient wealth in Egypt. Indeed, then he had no difficulty in accepting the lavish gifts of Pharaoh in exchange for his wife. But now he responded, “²²I have sworn to the Lord God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, ²³that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours, for fear you would say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’ ²⁴I will take nothing except what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre; let them take their share” (v. 22-24).

The phrase “a thread or a sandal thong” was formulaic and meant to indicate the willingness not to take something of the least value. The oath Abram swore was probably accompanied by an uplifted hand as he emphasized the seriousness of his commitment. That Abram swore to the Lord was an indication that Abram recognized the right of God to judge the fidelity with which he kept the oath. Abram was confident that the Lord Who had given him victory in battle was also able to sustain him financially. Abram had no need to look to the king of Sodom for sustenance. Abram merely accepted what his men had already consumed on their journey, and he did not deny his allies their rightful share of the spoils. That is, Abram did not make the oath of his convictions, theirs.

Melchizedek

But having unpacked the narrative, let us turn our attention to the figure Melchizedek. Melchizedek has been a mysterious figure throughout history. He is mentioned only twice in the Old Testament, in this

passage and in the Psalm 110. This cryptic figure was recognized as important by both Jewish and Christian writers. After all, he had blessed Abram, the father of the Hebrew people, and clearly Abram showed Melchizedek deference in their encounter. Abram presented him with a tithe of his all he possessed as a response to Melchizedek's blessing. Therefore Scripture seems to indicate that Melchizedek was in some sense superior to Abram.

But to ancient Jews, this presented a problem. How could anyone be greater than Father Abraham? Another concern was that the priesthood of Melchizedek was prior to that of the Levitical order, and apparently unrelated to it. That is, Melchizedek represented a priesthood that functioned independently of the traditional priesthood of Israel. To Jews, these were problems that needed to be resolved.

To resolve these issues, ancient Jews turned to some tortured explanations. For example, texts from Qumran Cave Eleven contain an account in which Melchizedek is described as an angel, perhaps even the archangel Michael. He made atonement for the righteous and exercised judgment on the wicked. Most other Jewish texts, however, described Melchizedek as a man, though an especially unique one. He was a high priest before God Most High (*Ēl Elyōn*) who originated the priesthood, according to Philo, who wrote around the time of Christ. Josephus, who wrote at the end of the first century AD suggested that Melchizedek founded the city of Jerusalem as its first king and priest. These interpretations, while not correct, at least bore some resemblance to the historical realities.

But Psalm 110 is oriented toward the future. There would be an ideal king who would serve as priest as well. This was a role that no one in David's human lineage could fulfill. It was a requirement only met by the Messiah.

¹The Lord says to my Lord:

‘Sit at My right hand

Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.’

²The Lord will stretch forth Your strong scepter from Zion, saying,

‘Rule in the midst of Your enemies.’

³Your people will volunteer freely in the day of Your power;

In holy array, from the womb of the dawn,

Your youth are to You as the dew.

⁴The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind,

‘You are a priest forever

According to the order of Melchizedek’” (Psalm 110:1-4).

God is addressing David's Lord, Who can only be Christ. Jesus claimed this Himself.

³⁵And Jesus began to say, as He taught in the temple, ‘how is it that the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David? ³⁶David himself said in the Holy Spirit,

“The Lord said to my Lord,

‘Sit at My right hand,

Until I put Your enemies beneath Your feet.’”

³⁷David himself calls Him ‘Lord’; so in what sense is He his son?’ And the large crowd enjoyed listening to Him” (Mark 12:35-37).

Peter offered that same interpretation in his sermon at Pentecost.

³⁴For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says:

‘The Lord said to my Lord,

“Sit at My right hand,

³⁵Until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.”

³⁶Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ - this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:34-36).

Naturally, Jewish writers made little about the symbolism of the bread and wine offered by Melchizedek to Abram. The first writer to do that was a Christian, Clement of Alexandria writing at the end of the second century who argued that these elements were symbolic of the Christian communion service.

The primary New Testament source for Melchizedek is found in the letter to the Hebrews. In that letter, the author was trying to persuade wavering Hebrew Christians in Rome not to abandon their faith during a time of persecution. The cornerstone of the author’s argument was to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus Christ. In referencing Melchizedek, that purpose was narrowed to focus on the superiority of the priesthood of Christ to that of the Levitical priesthood. That is, by showing that the priesthood of Melchizedek was a type of Christ, and that the priesthood of Melchizedek was superior to that of the Levites, the author hoped to persuade his readers that the role of Christ a priest was superior to, and had supplanted, the priesthood of the Jewish nation.

¹For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, ²to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all the spoils, was first of all, by the translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace. ³Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually. ⁴Now observe how great this man was to whom Abraham, the patriarch, gave a tenth of the choicest spoils. ⁵And those indeed of the sons of Levi who receive the priest’s office have commandment in the Law to collect a tenth from the people, that is, from their brethren, although these are descended from Abraham. ⁶But the one whose genealogy is not traced from them collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed the one who had the promises” (Hebrews 7:1-6).

To begin, the writer to the Hebrews asserted that Melchizedek’s priesthood was eternal, not temporary, as was the Levitical priesthood. The author of Hebrews seems to have assumed that his Jewish readers believed Melchizedek was the first priest. He had begun a new order. He had no predecessors as high priest. And most importantly, “he remains a priest perpetually” (Hebrews 7:3). A priest of the Levitical order, however, served from the age of twenty-five until he reached fifty years of age. No matter how faithful he had been to his calling, a Levitical priest could serve no more than those twenty-five years. Also, the Levitical priesthood, collectively, was only temporary. It began in the wilderness with the Mosaic covenant, and ended with the destruction of the temple in 70AD. Melchizedek’s priesthood, typifying Christ’s, was eternal and therefore superior to the Levitical priesthood.

Melchizedek's priesthood was also personal, not hereditary. Again we see that Melchizedek, himself, was "without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life" (Hebrews 7:3). That is not to say that Melchizedek had no ancestors, as some have suggested. It simply means that his ancestry was irrelevant to his calling as priest of the Most High God. Only a descendant of Aaron could be a priest in the Levitical priesthood. But Melchizedek was chosen as a priest, not because of his parentage, but because of his personal worth. The same was true of Christ. To be sure, the genealogy of Jesus was important for his role as king. Both Matthew and Luke take special pains to trace the lineage of Jesus back to David. But that was for the purposes of demonstrating Jesus' right to be king, not priest. In His role as priest, Jesus, needed no genealogy, and neither did Melchizedek.

And, like Jesus, Melchizedek was a king as well as a priest, "for this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God" (Hebrews 7:1). This could not be said of the Levitical priesthood. In fact, there is no biblical record of any Levite having ever been king over Israel. But Melchizedek was both priest and king. As was Jesus Christ. As the prophet Zechariah prophesied regarding the Messiah, "yes, it is He who will build the temple of the Lord, and He who will bear the honor and sit and rule on His throne. Thus, He will be a priest on His throne, and the counsel of peace will be between the two offices" (Zechariah 6:13). In this way Melchizedek, as both priest and king, was superior to the Levitical priests, and as a type of Christ demonstrated Christ's superiority as well.

Finally, Melchizedek's priesthood was universal, not national. The Levitical priests were priests for the nation of Israel. Melchizedek, however, was "priest of the Most High God" (Hebrews 7:1). As we have mentioned, the name *Ēl Elyôn* was a universal name for God, one used by Canaanites as well as by Abram. Jesus Christ, also, was not the Messiah of the Jews only, but rather of all those of every race whom God has chosen to call. The priesthood of Melchizedek was universal, as is that of Jesus Christ, and therefore again, it is superior to the Levitical priesthood.

Takeaways

As God has unfolded His plan of salvation, He has clearly and intentionally given clues of, and evidence for, discerning His eternal purposes. One of these clues is the use of types in the narrative to foreshadow future people and events. Such types were available to all who would be attentive to them. As we meditate on this passage, let us praise God for the revelation He has given us regarding His plan of salvation. He has made clear His plan and His purposes. Man is without excuse. Let us study closely His Word and pray for understanding that we might be the sons and daughters of *Ēl Elyôn* that we have been called to be.