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0521018714 - The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century A.D. and in the Epistle to the Hebrews

Fred L. Horton

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

## THE SCOPE OF THIS INQUIRY

The purpose of this work is to investigate the tradition about Melchizedek from its setting in the Old Testament through roughly the first five centuries of the Christian era. This is a rather complex undertaking in several ways. The sources themselves are sometimes quite difficult to disentangle and interpret. For instance, one of the more important texts, a text from Qumran, throws new light on the understanding of Melchizedek in the first century A.D.<sup>1</sup> One is disappointed, therefore, to find that this text is so fragmentary that less than half of what was at least a two-column work can be read; furthermore, the reading itself depends upon a piecing together of the text which may or may not be correct. The Old Testament sources are very difficult to interpret. In Gen. xiv. 18–20 we have a passing mention of Melchizedek as a priest-king who brings refreshment out to Abram who is just returning from battle, and in Ps. cx. 4 we have a mysterious formula by which the king in Jerusalem is declared to possess a priesthood ‘according to the order of Melchizedek’. These two passing references provide no clear grounding for our inquiry in the Old Testament, and much work has been required to make any sense out of these two Old Testament sources.<sup>2</sup> Both Philo and Josephus deal with Melchizedek and throw some light on the development of tradition from the first century B.C. to the first century A.D. Further, we possess two documents from Qumran which give us information for that same period. Nothing, however, adequately prepares us for the extraordinary use to which Melchizedek is put in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Even in our own day opinion among scholars is divided as to whether Melchizedek in Hebrews is an angelic being or a mere man whose record in the Old Testament has certain exegetical advantages for the purpose of the author. We are not surprised

<sup>1</sup> See below, Chapter 3.

<sup>2</sup> I have devoted all of Chapter 2 to this topic

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to find that the early church was similarly divided, and those who considered Melchizedek to be an angelic or divine being often went to extremes sufficient to call forth condemnation from anti-heretical writers in the early church. From these refutations of what we might call Melchizedekian heresies<sup>1</sup> we gain some insight into the growth of Melchizedek speculation in the first five centuries of the church's life. We shall also deal with the figure of Melchizedek in Rabbinic and Gnostic literature.

This inquiry will end with the situation in the first part of the fifth century A.D. This is a natural point of division from the point of view of the sources and my intentions. The fifth century A.D. would be a natural starting point for an investigation of the Melchizedek tradition in the middle ages since it is only after this time that the numerous legends about Melchizedek began to grow among both Jews and Christians. Further, Melchizedek came to play an important role in the thought of the Ishmaelite sect in the thirteenth century A.D.<sup>2</sup> I, however, have found no way short of pure conjecture to make a connection between the sources discussed in this study and the later Melchizedek legends. A full-scale study of the legends might point to some areas of contact, but that would be another thesis, possibly in another discipline.

I have divided the sources into what I have called the 'background sources' and the 'later sources'. The point of division is the Epistle to the Hebrews, a partition which begs the question of the date of the Epistle. I believe the Epistle belongs roughly in the last part of the first century A.D., but it would be improper to go into the date of the Epistle from such a narrow perspective as the Melchizedek tradition. I have, consequently, decided to discuss Hebrews at the end of my work.<sup>3</sup> There are several good reasons for this procedure. It is certainly true that Hebrews stands with Philo, Josephus, Qumran, and others as a witness to the growth of the tradition about Melchizedek in the first five centuries of the Christian era. To that extent there is no justifi-

<sup>1</sup> This is a term of convenience and has little value apart from convenience. The Melchizedekians, to be discussed in Chapter 4, are one of the sects included here under the designation 'Melchizedekian heresies'.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Vajda, 'Melchisédec dans la mythologie ismaélienne', *Journal Asiatique*, CCXXXIV (1943-5), 173-83.

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 6.

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cation for failing to place it in its proper chronological position. However, two considerations led me to the placement of the chapter on Hebrews at the end of this book. (1) Most of the material with which we shall deal from the early church represents attempts by the church to come to an adequate understanding of Melchizedek in Hebrews. Methodologically we cannot approach these sources with the problem already solved in our minds since this would cause us to do violence to the later Christian sources. (2) Should some line of development come to light between the background sources and the later sources we would then be in a position to relate Hebrews to that development without arguing in a circle.

I have my own theory about the ultimate source of Melchizedek speculation which has grown out of this study, but the reader will find no reference to this theory until the last chapter. I believe this work will have more value for the reader if no theoretical solution to the perplexing question of why so much should be said about such a minor Old Testament figure is imposed upon the sources themselves. I hope that the reader who disagrees with me on my solution to this problem might find something helpful in the other chapters. I have attempted in Chapters 2–5 to discuss each source presented in a manner which adequately relates it to its historical and literary setting. This involves from time to time a conjecture or a theory, but the reader will find that such conjectures or theories are limited to the single area of concern for which they were fashioned.

I have dealt exhaustively with the background sources insofar as that material is known to me, and I have dealt with all the published Melchizedek material from Gnostic sources. I have not been able to deal exhaustively with the early Christian sources nor with the Rabbinic sources since these sources in terms of quantity more than equal the amount of material dealt with otherwise and would extend this study beyond reasonable limits. It was not difficult to select the Rabbinic material and except for repetitions I have given what I believe to be a full review of Rabbinic thought about Melchizedek in the period under discussion. The task was not so simple with regard to the Christian sources, but in dealing with the Melchizedekian heresies, I found that a normative position from the church fathers seemed to emerge in their rebuttal of these heresies.

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Further, Christian thought about Melchizedek was to a large extent shaped by the reaction of the church to heretical thought about Melchizedek. Jerome's *Epistle LXXIII* which is central to our study is also a summary of orthodox opinion about Melchizedek.

## THE OCCASION FOR THIS STUDY

There is no need to justify the study of any problem within the Biblical field, and the question of the identity of Melchizedek and the growth of tradition around him is without doubt a classical problem in Biblical studies. It would be untrue, however, to claim that this study has no setting in current thought within the community of Biblical scholars. There is no harm, and there is potentially great benefit in relating one's work to a current fashion in the field since many persons will be addressing their energies to the same general problem in the same period of time. On the other hand, it is dishonest not to acknowledge one's indebtedness to such current fashion in an effort to escape the criticisms which will eventually show us the weaknesses of that range of inquiry. Here I do not propose to review all the literature on Melchizedek, as this would be almost impossible. Instead, at this point I shall attempt to focus on the main features of Melchizedek research in the past fifty years, concentrating on the recent revival of interest in this figure. Some of the most important literature is discussed in the following chapters, and this section is designed only as a brief synopsis.

The brevity of the Old Testament records concerning Melchizedek has not been matched by an equal restraint on the part of modern scholarship. The person who hopes to review the modern literature on Melchizedek undertakes to examine the commentaries on Hebrews, Psalms, and Genesis. In addition, histories of Israel seldom omit reference to Melchizedek, an important exception being Noth's *The History of Israel*.<sup>1</sup> The references to Melchizedek in the Old Testament occur in two very difficult chapters, and several studies have been made of these individual chapters which one who is interested in

<sup>1</sup> Trans. P. R. Ackroyd (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960). As we shall see in Chapter 2, Noth in other publications does assign some historical value to Gen. xiv. 18–20.

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Melchizedek cannot neglect. None of these modern sources, however, deals specifically with Melchizedek. Nevertheless they make up the largest body of secondary literature on the subject.

Interest in the figure of Melchizedek as an object of scholarly investigation *per se* has received much less attention. During the period of the 1920s, however, several works arose which have had importance for later studies. One of the first was an unpublished dissertation dealing with the history of speculation about Melchizedek and the application of that speculation to Hebrews.<sup>1</sup> About the same time an altogether remarkable study by G. Bardy<sup>2</sup> of the patristic literature on Melchizedek appeared in two installments. Not only did Bardy try to review the speculation about Melchizedek throughout the patristic period, he also included an introduction which dealt with the Jewish background<sup>3</sup> and a conclusion which traced the later Melchizedek legends, beginning in the sixth century A.D. To my knowledge there is no better review of the subject available to the reader. His treatment of the sources is quite balanced, and although he makes the Melchizedekians a figment of Epiphanius' imagination,<sup>4</sup> this represents a weak conclusion drawn from an excellent collection of data. Bardy deals mainly with the Melchizedekian heresies in the early church, and owing to his influence, I have decided that the Melchizedekian heresies provide a good base on which to build a view of the thought of the church about Melchizedek, though in terms of material cited and conclusions there is a wide difference between his work and mine.

A third work appeared in 1927 by a student of Dobschütz, Gottfried Wuttke, at that time Domhilfsprediger at Magdeburg.<sup>5</sup> This work attempted to trace the history of exegesis of Melchizedek in the Old Testament from the Epistle to the Hebrews right up to the modern period, although in point of fact the

<sup>1</sup> J. Jérôme, 'Das geschichtliche Melchisedech-Bild und seine Bedeutung im Hebräerbrief' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Freiburg University, 1927).

<sup>2</sup> 'Melchisédech dans la tradition patristique', *RB*, xxxv (October 1926), 496–509; xxxvi (January 1927), 25–45.

<sup>3</sup> The section devoted to this is based mainly on secondary sources as is proper to the type of study Bardy undertakes.

<sup>4</sup> 'Melchisédech dans la tradition patristique', p. 509.

<sup>5</sup> *Melchisedech der Priesterkönig von Salem: Eine Studie zur Geschichte der Exegese* (*BZfNW*, vol. v; Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1927).

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author's real expertise is in the field of patristic literature, and the bulk of the work centers around that literature. Unlike Bardy, Wuttke is not satisfied to deal mainly with the heretical opinions in the early church. Section 7 in his monograph<sup>1</sup> is a study of the treatment Melchizedek received at the hands of Greek and Latin writers right up to the middle ages. This is where the real value of Wuttke's work lies for the modern reader, especially the Biblical student whose acquaintance with the later fathers is something less than complete. On the other hand, his work is rather weak in certain vital areas. Remarkably, his treatment of Philo covers barely four pages which do little else than paraphrase the sources.<sup>2</sup> The review of the Rabbinic material<sup>3</sup> is done on the basis of the available German translations and is consequently rather selective, though correct in essence. Josephus is dealt with in two pages.<sup>4</sup> In his discussion of the Melchizedekian heresies,<sup>5</sup> Wuttke repeatedly calls them 'Gnostic' without offering any real proof for his contention. This causes him to conflate the Christian heresies with the Gnostic treatment of Melchizedek found in the Pistis Sophia and the Second Book of Ieù, leaving a totally unsatisfactory treatment of these two vital problems. Nevertheless, Wuttke's monograph is an achievement. He has brought together a great deal of material into a brief seventy-six pages and has thrown light on one area of thought about Melchizedek seldom handled by scholars. There is great value in simply viewing all of the sources together in one work, and for that reason alone one has grounds to be grateful for Wuttke's contribution.

In 1928 Hellmuth Stork wrote a short monograph<sup>6</sup> in which he attempted to deal at length with the Melchizedekians referred to by Hippolytus, Pseudo-Tertullian, and Epiphanius, reaching at the end conclusions as regard the historicity of the sect not too different from those of Bardy.

By the end of the decade of the twenties, the materials for an understanding of the figure of Melchizedek from the first

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 43ff.<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 14-17.<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 18-27.<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 17-18.<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 27ff.<sup>6</sup> *Die sogenannten Melchizedekianer mit Untersuchungen ihrer Quellen auf Gedankengehalt und dogmengeschichtliche Entwicklung* ('Forschungen zur Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons und der altkirchlichen Literatur', vol. VIII/2; Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1928).

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century B.C. through the first few centuries of the Christian era were available to scholarship. This was dependent to no small extent on the publication of some of the original sources in more accessible form. One might mention, for instance, the excellent text of Epiphanius' *Panarion* edited by Karl Holl of which the first two volumes were available in the twenties. Vol. II of this work contained Epiphanius' treatment of the Melchizedekians.<sup>1</sup> In addition, in 1925 the Coptic text of the Pistis Sophia was published in a definitive form by C. Schmidt,<sup>2</sup> and Schmidt's translations of the Pistis Sophia and the Books of Ieû made these Gnostic sources available to all who could read German.<sup>3</sup> Interest in the history of the development of the figure of Melchizedek in Christianity, Judaism, and Gnosticism which characterized this period began to flag in favor of interest in the historical Melchizedek which had already been given impetus by Sigmund Mowinckel.<sup>4</sup>

Since the relationship of the theory of divine kingship in ancient Israel to Melchizedek in the Old Testament is discussed in the next chapter at some length, I shall not repeat myself here. Melchizedek became an important point of connection for those who saw in the kingship a western form of a common Near Eastern kingship ideology. How was it that Israel progressed so rapidly from a tribal confederation under the leadership of a charismatic leader to a dynastic state which showed definite connections with the kingship patterns of neighboring nations? Some found a partial answer in Melchizedek. Following ancient exegesis of Gen. xiv, the identification of Salem with Jerusalem

<sup>1</sup> Karl Holl, ed., *Epiphanius*, vol. II (Die Griechischen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1922). Epiphanius treats the Melchizedekians in *Panarion*, LV.

<sup>2</sup> *Pistis Sophia* (Coptica: Consilio et Impensis Instituti Rask-Oerstediani, vol. II; Haunia: Gyldendalske Boghandel-Nordisk Forlag, 1925).

<sup>3</sup> C. Schmidt, *Pistis Sophia: Ein Gnostisches Originalwerk aus Koptischen übersetzt* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1925); and Carl Schmidt, *Gnostische Schriften in Koptischer Sprache aus dem Codex Bruccianus* (Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur, vol. VIII, Nos. 1-2; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1892). These are but two of Schmidt's excellent editions of these texts.

<sup>4</sup> *Psalmstudien II: Das Thronbesteigungsfest Jahwäs und der Ursprung der Eschatologie* (reprint from the first Oslo edition; Amsterdam: P. Schippers Verlag, 1961). We shall attempt to differentiate between Mowinckel's work and that of the 'myth and ritual school' in the next chapter.

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became a commonplace, and Melchizedek achieved a new importance as a pre-Israelite king of ancient Jebus in the patriarchal period. Attempts were even made to reconstruct the theological foundations of the Jebusite kingship on the basis of clues to be found in Ps. cx and Gen. xiv. We shall see in the next chapter that even though many of the results of this kind of investigation have come to be questioned seriously in recent times, many of the assumptions about Melchizedek's supposed kingship in Jerusalem which were associated with these results have not always been as critically handled. We shall in the next chapter undertake to examine how much we really can know about Melchizedek as a historical figure and what justice there is in the belief that he was seen as a divine priest-king or in the view that it is possible to reconstruct the Jebusite theology which underlay that priest-kingship.<sup>1</sup>

The reason for current interest in Melchizedek, however, is not directly related to either of these two veins in older scholarship. Rather, interest stems from the publication in 1965 of a fragmentary text from the eleventh Qumran cave which treats Melchizedek as a divine, heavenly figure. This publication came just at a time when New Testament scholarship was completing the first phase of a discussion of the relationship between Qumran and Hebrews.<sup>2</sup> Parallels between Hebrews and Qumran had been noted in 1958 by Y. Yadin as to angelology and eschatology.<sup>3</sup> Yadin claimed that the Epistle to the Hebrews shows signs of being a polemical work addressed to a group of Christians in danger of slipping back into a form of Judaism much like that of Qumran. C. Spicq soon thereafter<sup>4</sup> contributed a longer study in which he claimed that the Epistle to the

<sup>1</sup> For a short but balanced review of recent research in this vein see Ignatius Hunt's article, 'Recent Melchizedek Study', in the collection of essays in honor of Michael J. Grunthaner, *The Bible in Current Catholic Thought*, ed. John L. McKenzie, S.J. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1962), pp. 21-33.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Braun, 'Qumran und das Neue Testament: Ein Bericht über 10 Jahre Forschung (1950-1959) - Hebräer', *Theologische Rundschau*, xxx (June 1964), 1-38.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews', *Scripta Hierosolymitana* iv (1958), 36-55.

<sup>4</sup> 'L'épître aux Hébreux, Apollos, Jean-Baptiste, les Hellénistes et Qumran', *Revue de Qumrân*, 1 (1958-9), 365-90.

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Hebrews was written by the Apollos known to us from Acts, an Alexandrian who had contacts with Jerusalem. In that article Spicq tried to do justice to the parallels between Hebrews and Qumran while still holding to Alexandrian influence on the Epistle. Hans Kosmala in 1959 wrote a study in which he held that Hebrews was written to a non-Christian, Jewish community which had definite connections with Qumran.<sup>1</sup> None of these works relates directly to our concern with Melchizedek, for during that period only one text from Qumran, the Genesis Apocryphon, mentioned Melchizedek at all and that only in a rather literal Aramaic rendering of Gen. xiv. 18–20. Braun, in fact, could conclude that Melchizedek held no interest for the Qumranites in his review of the studies made up to 1960.<sup>2</sup> Thus it was very difficult to explain, if Qumran and Hebrews were really related, why so much would be made of Melchizedek in Hebrews. Further, the paucity of references to Melchizedek at Qumran could be explained on the basis that Melchizedek as a priest-king represented to the Qumranites the claims of the hated Hasmonaeon priest-kings which had been rejected by the sect.<sup>3</sup> Braun concluded that there was little positive evidence for a connection between Hebrews and Qumran and preferred in general to account for common elements on the basis of their being shared by all Judaism in the period.<sup>4</sup> One might judge from the dearth of studies after 1960 that Braun's position on the relationship between Qumran and Hebrews had won the day.

The publication in 1965 of the 11Q Melchizedek by A. S. Van der Woude<sup>5</sup> gradually set in motion a revived interest in the question of Qumran and Hebrews which is just now becoming quite important. Also in 1965 Van der Woude collaborated with M. De Jonge<sup>6</sup> to write an important article in which the first edition of the text was revised and some suggestions were

<sup>1</sup> *Hebräer-Essener-Christen* (Studia Post Biblica, vol. 1; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> 'Qumran und das Neue Testament', p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Frank Moore Cross, *The Ancient Library of Qumran* (2d ed., rev.; Anchor Books No. A272; New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961), pp. 135ff.

<sup>4</sup> 'Qumran und das Neue Testament', pp. 37f.  
<sup>5</sup> 'Melchisedech als himmlische Erlösergestalt in den neugefundenen eschatologischen Midraschim aus Qumran Höhle XI', *Oudtestamentische Studiën*, xiv (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), 354–73.

<sup>6</sup> '11Q Melchizedek and the New Testament', *NTS*, xii (1965–6), 301–26.

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made for the application of this text to the New Testament and especially to Hebrews. Still, no real interest was taken in this important document by the majority of scholars, especially American scholars. With the publication of the text in 1967 by Joseph Fitzmyer, attention of American scholars was drawn to this remarkable document.<sup>1</sup> It is fitting that it was Joseph Fitzmyer who brought forth the 11Q Melchizedek in this country, for only a year previously his commentary on the Genesis Apocryphon, which contained the only other reference to Melchizedek at Qumran, had been published.<sup>2</sup> This, combined with a long article on Melchizedek in 1963,<sup>3</sup> easily made him the most knowledgeable person in this area in America.

At this time of writing the full weight of the meaning of the 11Q Melchizedek has yet to be felt, but clues to its future use are provided by James A. Sanders of Union Seminary. Since his commentary on Hebrews is still in preparation, we can only repeat clues to its content provided by Sanders in other writings.<sup>4</sup> Sanders informs us that Hebrews is a document relating to the revolt against Rome in the first century and was probably written in A.D. 69 or 70.<sup>5</sup> The combination of new insights furnished by the 11Q Melchizedek and the older studies produced in the nineteen fifties promises to make a compelling case for the dependence of Hebrews upon Qumran and to locate its point of composition of Palestine. Sanders' reasons for dating the composition around the time of the destruction of the Temple are not yet known, and we must await his commentary. Sanders' recent article on the hymn in Phil. ii. 1-11 gives us some idea of the way in which the information which has come to us about the angelology of Qumran may be applied to the New Testament.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Sanders in the summer of 1970 taught a course

<sup>1</sup> 'Further Light on Melchizedek from Qumran Cave 11', *JBL*, LXXXVI (March 1967), 25-41.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave I: A Commentary* (Biblia et Orientalia, No. 18; Rome: Pontifical Institute, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> Fitzmyer, 'Now this Melchizedek...', *CBQ*, xxv (July 1963), 305-21.

<sup>4</sup> Some of Professor Sanders' work has appeared in popular form as a series of tape recordings entitled *Letter to the Hebrews*, published by Alba House of Ohio in their series *The New Testament Today*.

<sup>5</sup> 'Outside the Camp', *USQR*, xxiv (Spring, 1969), 240 and 240 n. 1.

<sup>6</sup> James A. Sanders, 'Dissenting Deities and Phil. 2:1-11', *JBL*, LXXXVIII (September 1969), 279-90.