

The Image of Melchizedek in the Epistle to the Hebrews and in the Jewish Texts of the Second Temple Period

Introduction

Jesus' high priesthood is one of the major themes of Hebrews. His priesthood is mentioned in 2:17–3:1, developed in 4:14–5:10, compared to Melchizedek's in 7:1–7:28, and detailed in 8:1–10:39. The Melchizedekian argument of chapter 7 may be seen as a culmination of the discussion about the superiority of Jesus' high priesthood.¹ Melchizedek is introduced in chapter 7 through a midrash on Gen 14:18–20,² with some references to Ps 110 and various other Jewish traditions from extrabiblical sources.³ The appearance of Melchizedek in several Jewish texts indicates the significance of his image for Jewish theological thought of the 1st century C.E. Some of these texts portray Melchizedek as a historical figure, while others depict him as an eschatological image. In what follows, I would like to investigate the Jewish traditions about Melchizedek and show how their ideas could be incorporated into Hebrews, as well as how Melchizedek's figure works in the author's argument about the superiority of Jesus' high priesthood. The author of Hebrews is interested in Melchizedek's figure not only as a real person of the past or the future, but also more so as the likeness of Christ and the unique Old Testament image of a person who is simultaneously a king and a high priest.

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Richard Longenecker, "The Melchizedek Argument of Hebrews," in *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament theology: Essays in Honor of George E. Ladd* (ed. Robert A. Guelich; Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Erdmans, 1978), 172.

² Paul Kobelsky, *Melchizedek and Melchireša* (Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1981), 117; see also William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (WBC 47a. Dallas, Texas: Word books, 1991), 158.

³ The figure of Melchizedek first appears in Hebrews 5:6,10.

Melchizedek's Figure in the Jewish Traditions

One might divide the Jewish traditions about Melchizedek into two main parts: the Old Testament traditions and Jewish traditions from extrabiblical sources.

The Old Testament Traditions

Gen 14:18–20

Melchizedek first appears in the Old Testament in Gen 14:18–20, a text which may be the prime source for the Melchizedek traditions in some extrabiblical texts. It probably does not belong to any of the usual pentateuchal sources.⁴ As Fred L. Horton suggests, this pericope might have been inserted into chapter 14 between verses 17 and 21, and probably does not have the same historical value as the rest of this chapter; furthermore, it most likely appeared before the time of the LXX translation of Genesis and the Genesis Apocryphon.⁵

This passage describes the meeting between Melchizedek and Abram, who returned after the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him (14:17).⁶ Melchizedek, who was both the king of Salem (βασιλεὺς Σαλημ)⁷ and the priest of God Most High (ἱερεὺς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου),⁸ brought out to Abraham bread and wine and blessed him (Gen 14:18–19).

⁴ J.A. Fitzmyer, “Melchizedek in the MT, LXX, and the NT,” *Biblica* 81 (2000): 65.

⁵ Fred L. Horton. *The Melchizedek Tradition: a Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century A.D. and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SNTSMS 30; Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1976), 13, 18–23; see also Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews* (Hermeneia Commentary. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 187.

⁶ There are some differences between the Masoretic text and the LXX: instead of **לֶחֶם** (“bread”) the LXX has ἄρτους (“loaves”) (Gen 14:18); instead of **קַדְשָׁן שַׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ** (“possessor of heaven and earth”) the LXX reads ὃς ἔκτισεν τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν (“who created heaven and earth”) (Gen 14:19). There are also some dissimilarities in the rest of this chapter (see, e.g., Fitzmyer, “Melchizedek in the MT, LXX, and the NT,” 68).

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מֶלֶךְ שָׁלֵם in the MT.

⁸ **כֹּהֵן לְאֵלֵי עֵלְיוֹן** in the MT.

It is unclear from the Masoretic text (MT) and from the LXX who tithed – whether Abram or Melchizedek: **וַיִּתֵּן-חֶלֶל מֵעֶשְׂרֵי מְכַל**.⁹ If Abram is offering the tithe, it would be in line with rest of the chapter and indicate the veneration of Melchizedek; if, however, Melchizedek is tithing, the text would indicate the exaltation of Abram.¹⁰ The first option is compatible with the theory that this passage shows Abram’s submission to the Jerusalem priesthood¹¹ and the assumption that Gen 14:18–20 is an insertion into chapter 14. Thus, while Melchizedek may be seen as a historical figure in this passage, some problems with his historical provenance appear because of the dating of the text.

Psalm 110

The name of Melchizedek also appears in Ps 110, which most scholars see as a royal song.¹² The enigmatic expression of 110:4 from the MT **וְלֵעוֹלָם עַל-יְדִבְרֵךְ תִּי מִלְכִּי-צְדָק** **כַּחֲהֵךְ** is translated ἱερεὺς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα κατὰ τὴν τάξιν Μελχισεδεκ (“a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek”) in the LXX.¹³ Due to the similarities between Ps 110:4 and 1 Macc 14:41,¹⁴ some scholars argue that it should be dated to the Maccabean period and related to Simon Maccabeus (142–134 B.C.).¹⁵ The majority of scholars, however, refer this text

⁹ καὶ ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ δεκάτην ἀπὸ πάντων in the LXX.

¹⁰ Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 17.

¹¹ H.H. Rowley, “Melchizedek and Zadok (Gen 14 and Ps. 110),” in *Festschrift für Alfred Bertholet zum 80. Geburtstag* (eds. Otto Eissfeldt et al.; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1950), 468–469; Herbert Schmid, “Abram und Melchizedek, David und Zadok,” *Kairos VII* (February 1965): 149; quoted in Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 17.

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Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150, revised* (WBC 21; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 111.

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This is Psalm 109 in the LXX.

¹⁴ οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ οἱ ἱερεῖς εὐδόκησαν τοῦ εἶναι αὐτῶν Σιμωνα ἡγούμενον καὶ ἀρχιερέα εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ἕως τοῦ ἀναστῆναι προφήτην πιστὸν – “The Jews and their priests have resolved that Simon should be their leader and high priest forever, until a trustworthy prophet should arise” (1 Macc 14:41 NRSV). Moreover, the first letters of each of the four verses of Ps 110 in the MT compose the name “Simon” (see, e.g., Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 30–31).

¹⁵ D. Bernard Duhm, *Die Psalmen* (2d ed.; Tübingen: Mohr, 1922): 398–399; quoted in Longenecker, “The Melchizedek Argument of Hebrews,” 163. D.M. Hay suggests that Ps 110 was composed earlier and when used by Maccabean rulers to defend their claims to priestly and royal authorities and legitimate their priestly authority (D.M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in the Early Christianity* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1973]: 24; quoted in

to the monarchic period of Israel's history and more specifically to one of the kings of the Davidic dynasty.¹⁶ They further connect it to a royal coronation in the Jerusalem Temple, the New Year festival, or a real battle.¹⁷ F. Horton suggests that Ps 110 represents a “song of victory sung upon David's return to Jerusalem after defeating Ammon”¹⁸ as recounted in 2 Sam 12:27–30. Alternatively, this text may have been composed on the occasion of David's conquest of Jerusalem and the succession of the Jebusite kingship (2 Sam 5:6–9),¹⁹ where Melchizedek could then represent a priest-king of the pre-Israelite period, probably of Jebusite origin.

While Melchizedek represents a priest-king of ancient times in Ps 110, a king of Israel also had some priestly functions; for example, he could offer some sacrifices (1 Sam 13:9; 2 Sam 6:13,17; 1 Kgs 8:62) and wear a linen ephod (2 Sam 6:14). The king directly was never called a priest, but the sons of David were called כְּהֹנָיִם (2 Sam 8:18);²⁰ in addition, a certain young man from the clan of Judah who was a Levite, became a priest in Micah's house (Judg 17:7–13).²¹ Nevertheless, the figure of Melchizedek could be used in Ps 110:4 as reference to a person who combines some royal and cult functions and serves as a model for royal priesthood.²² Although the author of the Psalm may have considered Melchizedek a historical character from ancient times, the emphasis of the Psalm is on his likeness to the king of Israel because of his combined functions.²³

Longenecker, “The Melchizedek Argument of Hebrews,” 163.)

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For example, A.A. Anderson, E.R. Hardy, T.N.D. Mettinger, D.A. Robertson, H. Rowley. See the survey of the basic researches on this subject and the bibliography in Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 112–113.

¹⁷ Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 112.

¹⁸ Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 34.

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Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 113.

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In the LXX they called ἀρχαῖ – “the chiefs of the court”.

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F. Horton suggests that the word כְּהֹנָיִם could be used not only for priestly functions, but also for chieftain or administrative officer and fits well the early years of David's reign (Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 51).

²² D.W. Rooke, “Jesus as Royal Priest: Reflections on the Interpretation of the Melchizedek Tradition in Heb7,” *Biblica* 81 (2000): 87.

²³ Heb. עַל-יְדִבְרֵהָּ תִּי is difficult to translate. עַל יְדִבְרֵהָּ means “because of”, “manner of”. י might be understood as ancient genitive ending, often used in the poetry (“יְדִבְרֵהָּ” BDB, 184).

The Jewish traditions about Melchizedek in the extrabiblical sources

Philo

Philo (20B.C.–50C.E.) mentions Melchizedek in *On the Preliminary Studies* (97–99), implicitly in *On the life of Abraham* (235), and in *Allegorical Interpretation* (3.79–82). In the first text, where Gen 14:18–20 serves as a proof of the practice of tithing, Melchizedek does not appear in the center of the discussion.²⁴ However, Philo indicates that he has learned the tradition of the priesthood himself (literary *αὐτομαθῆ* [learned by himself] and *αὐτοδίδακτος* [self-taught]).

In the second text, Melchizedek appears as *μέγας ἱερεύς* (“great priest”) of *μεγίστου Θεοῦ* (“the greatest God”), which is probably a paraphrase of the LXX’s *ὁ θεὸς ὁ ὑψιστος* or the MT’s *עֶלְיִן אֱלֹהִים*.²⁵ Philo adds some details to the story of Gen 14:18–20: Abram did not lose anybody from his people; Melchizedek, having seen it, was astonished and stretched his hand to heaven in prayer for him, and he also offered sacrifices of thanksgiving for the victory, rejoicing in Abram’s victory as his own.

In the third text, *Alleg. Interp.* 3.79–82 there is more extensive information about Melchizedek contained in the allegorical interpretation of Gen 14:18–20. Philo characterizes Melchizedek as *βασιλεὺς τῆς εἰρήνης* (“king of peace”), interpreting *Σαλήμ* as “peace”,²⁶ as *βασιλεὺς δίκαιος* (“righteous king”), which stems from a possible translation of his Hebrew name, and as God’s own priest. As F. Horton mentions, “God did not prefigure any work of Melchizedek (*οὐδὲν ἔργον αὐτοῦ προδιατυπώσας*), but set him out from the very first as priest and king”.²⁷

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Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 55.

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Ibid.

²⁶ This interpretation is from the similarity of *שָׁלֵם* with *שָׁלֵם*.

²⁷ Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 57.

Philo contrasts βασιλεύς – an author of laws – with τύραννος (“despot”) – one who introduces lawlessness. In addition, he makes some allegorical interpretations: a despot is νοῦς (“mind”), who is easily swayed by παθῶν (“passions”) and ἄρχων πολέμου (“the ruler of war”), but a king, is ἡγεμῶν εἰρήνης, Σαλήμ (“the chief of peace”) and is piloted by ὁ ὀρθὸς λόγος (“the right reason”). Melchizedek’s offering of bread and wine is interpreted as “the soul food full of joy and gladness,”²⁸ in contrast to the Ammonites and Moabites, who refused to supply Israel with food and were thus excluded from the divine congregation and assembly.

To sum up, in the first two passages, Melchizedek appears as a historical figure, but in the third one, he is a representation of the eternal λόγος.²⁹ Thus, both meanings are significant for Philo, because of his allegorical interpretation of Scripture: a character or event in the Bible has both literal and allegorical meanings. Philo tries to underline the antiquity of Melchizedek’s priesthood, based on the fact that he was the first priest mentioned in the Bible, and he probably also uses some extrabiblical sources for the interpretation of Gen 14:18–20.³⁰

Qumran

There are two references to Melchizedek in the Qumran scrolls: the Genesis Apocryphon (1Qap Gen XXII.14–17) and the Melchizedek Scroll (11QMelch). The first text offers a paraphrase of Gen 14:18–20 in Aramaic with some additions to the biblical text. The scroll dates from the end of the 1st century B.C. to the beginning of the 1st century C.E., with the original composition probably shaped by the end of the 2nd century B.C.³¹ The portion of the text that pertains to Melchizedek reflects a fairly literal understanding of the biblical text without any specific Qumranic ideological additions, unlike the rest of this document.³² The significant

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Philo, *Alleg. Interp.* 3.81, (Colson, LCL).

²⁹ Longenecker, “The Melchizedek Argument of Hebrews,” 169; see also Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 58.

³⁰ Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 58.

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See the discussion on this matter in Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 61–62.

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Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 64.

distinctions from the MT are as follows: “the food and drink” instead of “bread and wine,” and the identification of Salem with Jerusalem in 1Qap Gen XXII.13.³³

11Q Melch is a badly preserved fragmentary text which is most likely a part of a larger work³⁴ that would date to the middle of the 1st century C.E. It represents a very different view of Melchizedek, who appears as an eschatological figure. He is first mentioned in line 5 of column II and often appears thereafter as one who brings the elect ones, proclaims liberation to them and frees them from their iniquities (II.6). In addition, he makes atonement for the sons of Light (II.7) and carries out God’s judgments upon Belial and the spirits of his lot (II. 13). Lines 10–11 relate some quotations from Ps 82:1–2 and 7:8–9 to Melchizedek. Van der Woude tries to show that in the first citation from Ps 82, Melchizedek is designed first as one of the **אלוהים** (the angels or some heavenly beings,) and second, as a heavenly being who is higher than other **אלוהים**. He is also depicted as a heavenly redeemer figure who functions as an archangel warrior with some priestly characteristics³⁵ and, moreover, as a heavenly priest in the heavenly Temple.³⁶ M. de Jonge, Y. Yadin, Joseph Fitzmyer, and F. du Toit Laubscher support this view, but do not identify Melchizedek as the archangel Michael.³⁷ Jean Carmignac, however, applies **אלוהים** in line 9 to God and **אלוהים** in line 10 to the saints of the congregation. He does not see Melchizedek as a historical king-priest or celestial being like an angel, but rather as a certain

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This identification would be the gloss (see the discussion of this question in Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 63).

³⁴ J.T. Milik, “Milkî-Sedeq et Milkî-Reša’ dans les anciens écrits juifs et chrétiens (I),” *JJS*, 23 (Autumn 1972): 66; quoted in Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 66.

³⁵ A.S. van der Woude, “Melchizedek als himmlische Erlüsergestalt in den neugefundenen eschatologischen Midraschim aus Qumran-Höhle XI,” *OTS* 14 (1965): 354–373; quoted in Longenecker, “The Melchizedek Argument of Hebrews,” 167–168.

³⁶ Van der Woude, “Melchizedek als himmlische Erlüserergestalt,” 354–373; quoted in Ephraim Isaac, “Enoch and the Archangel Michael” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran Community* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; vol.2 of *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls: The Princeton Symposium on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth; Waco, Texas: Baylor University, 2006), 372.

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Longenecker, “The Melchizedek Argument of Hebrews,” 168. See also M. de Jonge and A.S. van der Woude, “11QMelchizedek and the New Testament,” *NTS* 12 (1966): 301–326; Y. Yadin, “A Note on Melchizedek and Qumran,” *IEJ* 15 (1965): 152–154; J.A. Fitzmyer, “Further Light on Melchizedek from Qumran Cave 11,” *JBL* 86 (1967): 25–41; F. du Toit Laubscher, “God’s Angel of Truth and Melchizedek,” *JSJ* 3 (1972): 46–51.

historical person inside the Qumran Community, who was recognized by the sect as a character similar to the biblical Melchizedek.³⁸ Most scholars, however, do not support this position.³⁹

F. Horton claims that מלכִּזְדֵּק in lines 9–10 refers to Melchizedek himself, supporting his point by examples from the Old Testament where this word is used for beings and deities other than Yahweh (e.g., 1 Sam 5:7; Judges 11:24). Melchizedek, then, is more than a human being, and he has a place in the divine assembly and makes judgment similar to God's (II.11). He also appears as the adversary of Belial.⁴⁰

Thus, while the Genesis Apocryphon sees Melchizedek as a historical person, 11QMelch understand him as a heavenly, eschatological and, probably messianic figure. He functions simultaneously as an angel who makes judgment upon Belial and as a high priest, bringing atonement to the sons of light. These features of Melchizedek are unique for the sources concerning him; finally, his functions are probably connected with interpretation of his name as “righteous king” and with his high priesthood from Gen 14:18-20.

Josephus

Melchizedek is mentioned twice in the works of Josephus (37C.E.–about 100C.E.): in *Jewish War* (6.438) and in *Jewish Antiquities* (1.179–181). According to the first text, Melchizedek was a Canaanite chief (Χανααναίων δυνάστης), who founded the city Jerusalem. His name means “righteous king” (βασιλεὺς δίκαιος) and fits his life. He was the first priest of God and built the first Temple (τὸ ἱερόν) in the city. Because of this fact, it was renamed from Σόλυμα to Ἱεροσόλυμα.

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J. Carmignac, “Le document de Qumran sur Melkisedeq,” *RevQc* 7 (1970): 343–378; quoted in Longenecker, “The Melchizedek Argument of Hebrews,” 168–169.

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Longenecker, “The Melchizedek Argument of Hebrews,” 169.

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Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 75, 77–78.

Ant. 1.179–181 describes the events of Gen 14:18–20 and also depicts Melchizedek as the righteous king and the priest of God in Jerusalem, which is the former Solyma. Melchizedek was very hospitable with Abraham and also with his army, providing them all that they needed. In the course of the feast, he extolled Abraham and blessed God for delivering Abraham’s enemies into his hands. Abraham then gave Melchizedek the tithe of the spoil.

Thus, for Josephus the historian, Melchizedek is, first of all, a historical person – the Canaanite chief, who became a priest of God because of his righteousness and who built the Temple in Jerusalem. Josephus resolves the problem of the ambiguity of the Hebrew and Greek texts of Gen 14:20 about the tithe by indicating that it was Abraham who gave the tithe.

The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the Rabbinical Sources

The book of Jubilees (161–140 B.C.)⁴¹ tends to elevate Levi over Judah, which may be seen in the blessings of Isaac (*Jub.* 31:9–20) and in the employment of the title of “priest of the Most High God” connected with the priesthood of Melchizedek in Gen 14:18 for Levi and Judah, with particular emphasis upon Levi (*Jub.* 32:1).⁴²

The idea of the priesthood of the Most High God appears also in the Second (Slavonic) Apocalypses of Enoch.⁴³ The final chapters (2 *En.* 71–72) in one of the recensions of this book are dedicated to the miraculous birth of Melchizedek, who was born from Sothonim,⁴⁴ the wife of Nir from God (2 *En.* 70:16).⁴⁵ Melchizedek was created by the word of God (2 *En.* 71:30). He

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O.S. Wintemute, “Jubilees: a New Translation and Introduction” in *The Expansions of the “Old Testament” and Legends, Wisdom and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms, and Odes, Fragments of lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works* (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; vol.1 of *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983-1985), 44.

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Longenecker, “The Melchizedek Argument of Hebrews,” 162.

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Unfortunately, the historical provenance and the date of 2 *En.* is a question for researchers. The date of this book may vary from the 1st century B.C. to the 10th century C.E., but some peculiarities of 2 *En.* indicate that its origins are ancient.

⁴⁴ соПаниМА or соФонИМА in the different Slavonic manuscripts of 2 *En.* (See e.g., M.I. Sokolov, *Slavyanskaya kniga Enocha Pravednogo* (The Slavonic Book of Enoch the righteous one) (Moscow: Sinodalnaya Tipographia, 1910), 71.

⁴⁵ This legend was considered by some scholars as an interpolation into the text of 2 *En.* (e.g., Horton, *The Melchizedek tradition*, 81). However, A. Vaillant demonstrated that this story is an inherent part of this book (A. Vaillant, *Le Livre des secrets d’Hénoch: Texte slave et traduction française* (Paris: Institut d’études slaves, 1952); see also F.I. Andersen, “2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch: a new Translation and Introduction” in *The Old*

had the seal of the high priesthood and also blessed the Lord (*2 En.* 71:18–19). God revealed to Nir that this child would be taken by the archangel Michael to Paradise and after the Flood would become the head of all priests forever (*2 En.* 71:28–30). This text apparently tries to express the idea about the incarnation of the spirit of Melchizedek in the high priests of Israel. According to this line of thought, Melchizedek of Gen 14 may be one of the incarnations of the original, heavenly Melchizedek (cp. *2En.* 72:6).⁴⁶ The priesthood of Melchizedek could be a continuation of the priestly line from Methuselah, son of Enoch. Melchizedek himself is considered to be a grandson of Lamech in this text.⁴⁷ One may also see the trace of the polemics about the legitimacy of several priest clans of Israel in this story.⁴⁸

The identification of Melchizedek as a descendant of Lamech appears also in the Targums and in the rabbinical traditions. Although these texts were compiled later than Hebrews they might preserve earlier traditions. Targum Onqelos, Targum Neofiti and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Gen 14:18 indicate that Melchizedek is the king of Jerusalem; Targum Neofiti and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan show that he is in fact Shem, the son of Noah. In addition, Targum Pseudo-Jonathan indicates that he was a righteous king. In some rabbinical texts, Melchizedek has received his priesthood from Shem, but God later deprived him of it because Melchizedek blessed Abraham before God (*Lev. Rab.* 25:6; *b. Ned.* 32b, cp. *Antiquities* 1. 181). However, in some other rabbinical texts Melchizedek is one of the four eschatological figures, along with the Davidic Messiah, the Messiah the son of Joseph, and Elijah (*Song. Rab.* 2.13.4; *b. Sukkah* 52b).⁴⁹

Thus, *2En.*, some Targums and some rabbinic traditions try to include Melchizedek in Enoch's genealogical line, while some other rabbinic traditions put him together with several important eschatological figures. Moreover, *2En.* indicates his miraculous birth from God, suggesting his not quite human origin.

Testament Pseudepigrapha (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; 2 vols.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983-1985), 1:92.

⁴⁶ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 193.

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A.A. Orlov, "Melchizedek Legend of 2 (Slavonic) Enoch," *JSJ* 31.1 (2000): 28.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

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This analysis is from Longenecker, "The Melchizedek Argument of Hebrews," 165–166.

The Use of the Jewish Traditions about Melchizedek in Hebrews

The Jewish traditions about Melchizedek play an important role in the midrash on Gen 14:18–20 in Hebrews 7. Paul J. Kobelsky picks out two separate strands of traditions incorporated into this midrash. The first one is based on Gen 14:18–20 and its interpretations, which are included in 7:1–2. The author needs these to establish the superiority of Melchizedek over the Levitical priests in 7:4–10. The second one appears in 7:3, and is further interpreted in 7:11–28 in order to explain Jesus’ priesthood.⁵⁰

Employing the material of Gen 14:18–20, Hebrews 7:1–2 mentions the meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek, and Melchizedek’s blessing, but says nothing about the words of blessing themselves and nothing about the offering of bread and wine. The author derives from the story of Genesis such important features of Melchizedek as his being the King of Salem and the Priest of God Most High and underlines the exchange between Melchizedek and Abraham.⁵¹ He resolves the ambiguity of Gen 14:20 concerning the subject of the tithe in the same manner that the writings of Josephus and the Genesis Apocryphon do: Abraham gave the tithe to Melchizedek. The etymological interpretation of Melchizedek’s name as “righteous king” is similar to Josephus, Philo and the Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan; referring to him as “king of peace” is similar to Philo. Such an interpretation of Gen 14:18–20, which shows Melchizedek to be greater than Abraham, is the first basis of the superiority of Melchizedek over the Levites.

The argument of Heb 7:3 that Melchizedek has neither human genealogy nor a date of birth or death can be based on the method of the interpretation of Scripture as an argument from silence, similar to Philo and the Rabbis. What is not in Scripture does not exist in the world.⁵² Indeed, there are no data about Melchizedek’s ancestors, nor about his birth and death, in the Torah. According to this method, it can be concluded that he is “without human antecedent.” He does not have a natural birth or death, which means he is eternal.⁵³

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Kobelsky, *Melchizedek and Melchireša*, 121–122. One could add that the argument of 7:3 also plays an important role in the discussion of Melchizedek’s superiority to Levites.

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Luke T. Johnson, *Hebrews: a Commentary* (New Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 176.

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Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 190.

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However, one can also expect the incorporation of some extrabiblical traditions in this verse. Moreover, some scholars suggest the usage of the poetic or hymnic elements of the traditional material incorporated into 7:3.⁵⁴ These features of Melchizedek are similar to those of 11Q Melch, 2 *En.* and some rabbinic texts, in which he is represented as a heavenly eschatological figure and a heavenly priest. The Qumranites' idea that Melchizedek will bring atonement to the sons of light might have influenced the author of Hebrews. It may have suggested to him the idea about the Day of Atonement within his argument about Jesus' high priesthood. Some scholars believe that Qumran influences in Hebrews suggest that the audience of this letter consisted of former Qumranites,⁵⁵ but, regardless, the ideas about Melchizedek's eternity in Heb 7:3 appear similar to the concepts of 11QMelch.

The eternity of Melchizedek serves, in turn, as a reason for his eternal priesthood in Heb 7:3. This is the second basis of his superiority over mortal Levitical priests (7:7–8) and the main point of comparison between Melchizedek and Jesus.

Thus, one could see the influence of the traditions regarding Melchizedek in Hebrews 7 both as a historical and as an eschatological figure. It is impossible to show unambiguously with which traditions the author of Hebrews was familiar. One might see the connections to Philo, Josephus, the Qumranic texts, Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan, 2 *En.*, and some rabbinic texts. However, it is quite possible that they did not express their own unique ideas, but widespread traditions concerning Melchizedek. Such attention given to Melchizedek in various Jewish traditions independent of one another testifies to the significance he plays for several strands of Jewish theological thought of that period.

More important is how the author of Hebrews deals with the traditions he has at hand. He uses them in the same manner as the biblical arguments in Heb 1:3–2:4; 2:5–18; 3:1–4:13; 8:31:31–34, and others. His creative method of the interpretation of Scripture is based on a Christocentric perspective,⁵⁶ which interprets a passage in the light of the experience of life with Christ. The author shows his audience that the words of Scripture are addressed to them in the

Johnson, *Hebrews*, 177.

⁵⁴ E.g., Kobelsky, *Melchizedek and Melchireša*, 120. Harold W. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 189.

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E.g., Longenecker, "The Melchizedek Argument of Hebrews," 171–172; and also Raymond E. Brown, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament" in *John and Qumran* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1972), 6.

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The term comes from Longenecker, "The Melchizedek Argument of Hebrews," 175.

same manner as they were addressed to their ancestors (Heb 1:1). In the same way that he shows what *today*, from Ps 94:7–11 in Heb 4:13–11 and the *new covenant* from Jer 31:31–34 in Heb 8:8–13, means for God’s people, he shows what Melchizedek’s figure of actually means.

In his Melchizedekian argument the author of Hebrews uses not only the biblical passages, but also some extrabiblical traditions. He is not so interested in Melchizedek’s figure himself, but he shows that the meaning of this figure, which had a large impact on the Jewish theological thought and messianic expectations, can be properly understood only in the light of Christ.⁵⁷ The biblical passages and the extrabiblical traditions about Melchizedek as well as their interpretation in Hebrews build the theological basis of his likeness to Christ.

The author of Hebrews tries to show that Scripture and the traditions themselves indicate this likeness⁵⁸ and reveals this to his audience. Using the etymological method of the interpretation of Melchizedek’s name in 7:2, he shows the connection between the traditions and the messianic expectations reflected in Ps 44:8 (“king of righteousness”) and Isa 9:6; 32:17; Mic 5:5; Zech 9:10. Employing the tradition about Melchizedek’s eternity in 7:3, he directly indicates his resemblance to Christ: ἀφωμοιωμένος δὲ τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ (“having been made like the Son of God”)⁵⁹ and builds the bridge to the likeness of his priesthood to Christ’s. Hebrews 7:11 also indicates that Melchizedek is in fact only the likeness of Christ who is ἕτερος ἱερεὺς κατὰ τὴν τάξιν Μελχισέδεκ (“another priest according to the order of Melchizedek”) but not Melchizedek himself. In Heb 7:15–17 the author concludes that Christ as ἕτερος ἱερεὺς is κατὰ τὴν ὁμοιότητα (“in the likeness”) of Melchizedek, linking together their eternity with the support of Ps 110:4. Hebrews 7:3 attributes to Melchizedek the eternal priesthood (εἰς τὸ διηνεκές) as Ps 110:4 does with the Davidic king – εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.⁶⁰ The connection between these two texts is

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One might compare such a method of the interpretation with the Pesharim as “eschatological” and “fulfillment” interpretation of the Bible in the Qumran community (see, e.g., James H. Charlesworth, *The Pesharim and Qumran History. Chaos or Consensus?* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2002]).

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Johnson, *Hebrews*, 177.

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ἀφωμοιόω can be translated as either “make like” or “compare” as it appears in Plato’s Republic 517B.

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Kobelsky, *Melchizedek and Melchireša*, 124.

probably possible because of the messianic understanding of Ps 110 in that period (cp. Act 2:34–35).⁶¹

Melchizedek is not only the likeness of Christ for Hebrews, but also the image of a person who is simultaneously a king and a high priest. Indeed, he is a unique image of the combination of royal and priestly functions, which was derived from Gen 14:18–20 and used by Ps 110 as a model of the royal priesthood.⁶²

Conclusions

To sum up, one might see in Hebrews 7 the influence of the numerous traditions about Melchizedek, including some Old Testament passages (Gen 14:18–20; Ps 110:4) and several extrabiblical texts. Some of them present him as a historical figure, others as an eschatological one. However, it is impossible to show exactly which extrabiblical sources the author of Hebrews uses in his Melchizedekian argument, because most of the sources examined above might only reflect the widespread traditions. Such attention to Melchizedek in numerous Jewish traditions indicates his importance for several strands of Jewish theological thought of that period.

Nevertheless, the author of Hebrews is not so much interested in Melchizedek's figure himself but, employing a creative method of scripture interpretation in light of the experience of the life with Christ, he shows his audience the genuine meaning of such an important figure for Jewish traditions: he is a likeness of Christ. The author of Hebrews requires this figure for his discussion about the superiority of Christ's priesthood. The Melchizedekian argument works in the following way: Hebrews derives two basic reasons of the superiority of Melchizedek to Levitical priests: he is greater than Abraham, and he is a priest forever because of his eternity. The last argument is the main point of comparison between Christ and Melchizedek. The superiority of Melchizedek over Levi is a likeness of the superiority of Christ's high priesthood

⁶¹ Longenecker, "The Melchizedek Argument of Hebrews," 175.

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It was shown above.

over that of Aaron; Melchizedek's eternity and his eternal priesthood is a likeness of the eternity of Christ and of the nature of his high priesthood.

Finally, as stated above, Melchizedek is not only the likeness of Christ but also the unique Old Testament image of the combination of royal and priestly functions. Such an image is well suited for the argument about the union of the messianic functions of king and priest in Jesus, which were often viewed as separate in several strands of Jewish messianic expectations, as, for example, in the separation of Davidic and priestly messianic concerns in Qumran.⁶³ This suggestion indicates a possible direction for further research of these matters. The author of Hebrews uses this image of a person who is simultaneously a king and a high priest as a link in his theological chain: Christ is both God and human, priest and sacrifice, messianic king and perfect high priest.

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See e.g., John F. Collins, "What was Distinctive about Messianic Expectation at Qumran," in *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran Community* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; vol.2 of *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls: The Princeton Symposium on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth; Waco, Texas: Baylor University, 2006), 71–92.

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