

Margaret Barker on Melchizedek

These excerpts here are from her book entitled, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy*

A divine figure in the Qumran text

In the Qumran Melchizedek text, however, **he is divine, the heavenly high priest**, the anointed prince who comes to Jerusalem to perform the Great Atonement at the **end of the tenth Jubilee and to establish the Kingdom**. In the New Testament, Jesus is identified as this Melchizedek (Heb. 7.15), and the bread and wine of his sacrifice must have had some link to the bread and wine of Melchizedek. (Barker, p. 64)

The Older Testament?

There is much about the temple that is still unknown. There are also several texts in the Hebrew Scriptures which cannot be placed in any known context. Together, however, these texts have a certain consistency which at the very least invites speculation.

- **Melchizedek, the priest of God Most High, brought out bread and wine (Gen. 14.18). Until the discovery of the Melchizedek text at Qumran, Melchizedek was thought to be a relatively minor figure in the tradition; it is now clear that he was the Messiah, expected to make the final atonement sacrifice at the end of the tenth Jubilee.** Melchizedek was 'born' in the holy of holies among the holy ones (Ps. 110. LXX Ps. 109) and was the eternal priest, not by virtue of descent from Levi, but because he had been raised up, i.e. resurrected (Heb. 7.15-16).
- Moses, the high priests and the elders who stood before the heavenly throne saw the God of Israel and ate and drank before him. They suffered no harm (Exod. 24. 9-11). What was this meal?
- When Moses offered his own life for the sins of Israel he was told that such a sacrifice was not possible; each man bore his own sin (Exod. 32.30-33). **What older view of atonement was excluded from the Hebrew Scriptures?**
- The secret things belonged to the LORD and were no concern of humans (Deut. 29.29). What mattered was keeping the Law, and nobody needed to go up to

heaven to receive that (Deut. 30.11—14). Who had formerly gone up to heaven to learn the secret things?

- Aaron was only permitted to enter the holy of holies once a year; had the earlier practice been different? (Lev. 16.2)
- Ezekiel knew that the mark of the LORD was a *tau*, at that period written as a diagonal cross (Ezek. 9.4). This mark protected from the wrath. (Barker, p. 71)

Two rituals exclusive to the ancient high priests

There were two rituals exclusive to the ancient high priests: entering the holy of holies with the blood on the Day of Atonement and consuming the bread of the Presence. Since these two are closely linked to the elements of the Eucharist, it seems likely that the high priestly traditions are the ultimate source of the imagery. There are, however, problems reconstructing the history and traditions of the high priesthood, not least because there is no certain reference to Aaron nor to his priests in any pre-exilic text. Even Ezekiel, who was a priest in the first temple, does not mention him. The Elephantine texts, which give a glimpse of Jewish life in Egypt in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE often mention priests but never Aaron, nor Levi nor the Levites. Any rites and duties associated with Aaron probably came from the older royal priesthood of Melchizedek. The one appearance Melchizedek himself makes in the Old Testament is to bring out bread and wine (Gen. 14.18) which the Midrash says were a symbol of the laws of priesthood, the bread being the Bread of the Presence (Gen. R. XLIII. 6). Philo, when discussing the hospitality gifts of bread and water, said of him: 'Let Melchizedek offer wine instead of water' (Allegorical Interpretation 3.82), an obvious link to the miracle at Cana, which, according to John, was the first manifestation of Jesus' Glory (John 2.11). Barker, p. 75)

Melchizedek was associated with the feast mankind enters when entering Yahweh's presence

So much information about the temple has disappeared and has to be reconstructed from allusions elsewhere. There were, for example, libation vessels kept on the Bread of the Presence table (Exod. 25.29, cf. 1 Kgs 7.50), but there is no record of how these were used in the temple.⁶⁹ There had at one time been meals in the temple; the elders who saw the God of Israel on Sinai and ate and

drank in safety before him is an encoded reference to this (Exod. 24.11). So too, perhaps, Psalm 23: the table set before the anointed one, who would dwell in the house of the LORD forever, and the belief that the ruler in Israel would come forth from the House of bread, beth lehem (Mic. 5.2). For the rest, we look in the shadows and listen for echoes. In the Midrash Rabbah we find: 'Melchizedek instructed Abraham in the laws of the priesthood, the bread alluding to the Bread of the Presence and the wine to libations' (Gen. Rab. XLIII.6). 'The House of Wisdom is the tabernacle, and Wisdom's table is Bread of the Presence and wine' (Lev. Rab. XI.9). 'In this world you offer before me Bread of the Presence and sacrifices, but in the world to come I shall prepare for you a great table' (followed by a reference to Ps. 23, Num. Rab. XXI.21).⁷⁰ A gloss in T. Neofiti to Exodus 25.29—30 says that the vials of anointing oil were also kept on the table.⁷¹ (Barker, p. 90)

Another mystery is the investiture described in the Testament of Levi. Levi saw seven angels giving him the insignia of high priesthood and he described the ritual: he was anointed, washed with water and then fed bread and wine, 'the most holy things',⁷² before eventually receiving the incense (T. Levi 8.1-10). Since the most holy bread reserved for Aaron and his sons was the Bread of the Presence (Lev. 24.5-9), this is probably what Levi received from the angels in his vision, and he received it with wine. These rituals bear some resemblance to the ordination rituals in Leviticus 8 in so far as both texts describe washing, vesting, crowning and anointing, but there is nothing in the Testament of Levi about smearing blood and eating the boiled flesh of the offerings; instead, there is bread and wine. Did the Testament of Levi recall the older ritual, the Melchizedek ritual, which involved the bread and wine? This would be consistent with the implications of the papyri from Elephantine, that an earlier cult had not offered animal sacrifices. And if this is so, who had preserved this knowledge since the destruction of the first temple?⁷³ (Barker, p.90-91)

Priests

An important preliminary to any consideration of priesthood has to be the question of high priesthood, and especially of the relationship between the Melchizedek high priesthood, favoured by the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, and the Aaronite high priesthood, which was deemed superseded (Heb.

7.11—17). Any hypothesis depends on the dates assigned to texts. It is possible to make a good case for there being no reference to Moses or to the Aaron high priesthood in pre-exilic texts.⁶¹ It is also possible that the crucial Melchizedek Psalm (110/ 109) was a very late second temple composition. In other words, either of the two high priesthoods could be presented as a second temple innovation. It is a fact, though, that the Yeb texts, which describe a community who worshipped the LORD in southern Egypt in the fifth century BCE, often mention priests, but never mention the familiar biblical names of Aaron or Levi. The 'surface' picture of the Aaronite high priesthood in the Old Testament, therefore, must be treated with caution. On the other hand, since the Melchizedek high priest was a divine saviour figure at Qumran (IIQMelch), and this community saw itself as the guardian of the true traditions when Israel had gone astray, the relationship between the royal Melchizedek priesthood and the Aaronite priesthood must be significant. The Christians restored the Melchizedek priesthood, along with a great deal else from the first temple. We can only guess, given the other elements from the older temple that were restored in the Church, what the Christians knew and why they acted as they did. Suffice it to say that New Testament scholars who suggest that Jesus was identified as the Melchizedek high priest because it was clear that he did not come from the family of Levi are unhelpful, and unlikely to advance our knowledge of Christian origins. (Barker, p. 122-123)

Fn#61: E.g. T. C. Vriezen, 'Essentials of the Theology of Isaiah', in B. W. Anderson and W. Harrelson (eds), *Israel's Prophetic Heritage*, London, 1962, pp. 128-46; G. Widengren, 'What do we know about Moses?' in J. I. Durham and J. R. Porter (eds), *Proclamation and Presence. Essays in Honour of G. Henton Davies*, London, 1970

Melchizedek the Heavenly High Priest

Melchizedek, of whom so little is known from canonical texts, and whose most significant appearance in Ps. 110 (LXX, 109) has become an opaque text, was clearly a **major messianic figure** for those who told the history of Israel through the Enoch traditions, and regarded the second temple as impure and apostate. **The Melchizedek text depicts him as the heavenly high priest, Elohim coining to bring the Day of Judgement, the great Day of Atonement at the end of the tenth**

Jubilee. This was temple ritual actualized in history. The Messiah was the anointed high priest, the Angel. According to one reconstruction of this fragmented text, the teachers of Melchizedek's people had been hidden and kept secret.¹²⁸ All of this indicates consistently that the angel priesthood was a memory from the first temple, something destroyed by the work of Josiah. Perhaps it was one of those things in which Israel had gone astray in the age of wrath, which is what the Damascus Document calls the period of the second temple. (Barker, p. 144-145)