Melchizedek at Qumran and Nag Hammadi

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Nearly fifty years ago two astounding libraries of hidden records were discovered in the Middle East: the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi Library.

It is my intention to examine Melchizedek as found in these two libraries of apocryphal literature. This may help us to see just how we can search in apocryphal writings with a single focus in mind. It may also demonstrate the paucity of possible sound conclusions. In this field, scholarly conclusions must remain highly flexible.

Over the centuries many legends have surrounded Melchizedek. Most of the written materials outlining these traditions cluster around the intertestamental period, but some come as late as the Middle Ages. These later versions, however, seem to depend on earlier ones. From these materials we can learn something of what people at particular periods and in particular places believed about Melchizedek, but we should not fool ourselves into thinking that we have learned about Melchizedek himself.

Legends merge. Once one begins looking, one finds recognizable bits and pieces from many quarters. It is tempting to gather together the texts, compute the most oft-repeated ideas into columns, then choose the lengthiest columns and assume that these ideas can be put together to form a true picture. But such a picture is distorted at best. It must be remembered that our texts come from only a handful of places, which are widely separated geographically, and that they were often recorded in different centuries. Thus, we must avoid this methodology.

One other word of caution. Latter-day Saints should be cautious in reading into these materials their own understanding of Melchizedek's role which has come to us through Joseph Smith. We cannot be confident that either the Qumran community or the Gnostics who wrote the Nag Hammadi texts represent a true understanding of Melchizedek.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, deliberately hidden in jars, recorded much concerning the life and beliefs of the Jewish sect many believe to be the Essenes, who inhabited their desert home in the hills overlooking the Dead Sea from about 135 B.C. to A.D. 68 (not a continuous occupation). They thought of themselves as a righteous remnant of the Jews, living in the latter days in the wilderness, opposing an apostate priesthood in power at the temple in Jerusalem, which temple they considered defiled. They were engaged in building a community of the Elect which would serve as a nucleus for the Kingdom of Heaven which was shortly to come. They viewed themselves as heirs of the eternal covenant between God and Israel. While much more could be said in summarizing the views of these ancient people, nothing I have been able to find gives a satisfactory answer to the question: "What are writings about Melchizedek doing at Qumran?"

Perhaps their concern for the legitimate priesthood was background for the **Genesis Apocryphon** ("secret book," singular of apocrypha), which was likely written about 100 B.C. in Aramaic.

Scholars struggle in attempting to classify this document. Joseph Fitzmyer, in his careful, comprehensive way, declares: "It is not simply a midrash, just as it is not simply a targum. . . . We stress then the independent character of this composition." [1]

Here Melchizedek appears by name, and the narrative follows the Genesis text closely. The few variations from our Genesis text are interesting. It is said that when the king of Sodom heard that Abraham had returned with the captives and booty, he went up to meet him.

He came to Salem, that is Jerusalem, while Abram was camped in the Valley of Shaveh—this is the Vale of the King, the Valley Bethhacherem. Melchizedek [one word in this text], the King of Salem, brought out food and drink [not bread and wine] for Abram and for all the men who were with him; . . . [he blessed Abram] and he [Abram] gave him a tithe of all the flocks of the King of Elam and his confederates. Then the king of Sodom approached Abram and said, "My Lord, Abram, give me the men that are mine who are captives with you and whom you have rescued from the King of Elam." [2]

A brief analysis of the few changes we find may prove instructive. This version smooths out the Genesis account by having the king of Sodom come to Salem, therefore making Melchizedek's appearance natural. As it is in KJV, Melchizedek drops in from nowhere and then disappears never to be heard of more. When comparing this text to Genesis, one wonders what the scribe was copying as he sat in the Qumran scriptorium. Did he have before him one ancient text or was he collating several accounts? After reading the Genesis Apocryphon, turning to Genesis is like reading a digest. That idea seems as convincing as that the Apocryphon is full of embellishments. Some additions are possibly editorial additions, like the Salem-Jerusalem attachment, but much of the rest falls coherently into place. If there were much editing involved, it would be expected that the sacrificial elements in Melchizedek's "bread and wine" would have been noted, since the scribe belonged to a group who championed a Zadokite priesthood and could have seen Melchizedek as chief of that line. The scribe, rather, wrote "food and drink," which is closely synonymous but subtracts the obvious sacramental quality. The text also has Melchizedek bringing the food and drink "for all the men who were with him," which may water down the ritual dimensions, substituting a feast for a sacrament. The addition of the names of the previous owners of the booty on which he paid tithes seems to finish the sentence in Genesis: "And gave him a tenth of all the flocks of the king of Elam and his confederates." The Genesis Apocryphon is difficult to classify as pure legend. Would it not be better to examine it in the light of a possible prior text?

The Melchizedek Scroll from Qumran Cave 11 (hereafter referred to as **11Q Melch**) presents some of the same problems as the Genesis Apocryphon; however, this time we are dealing with a midrash. Is this scroll the autograph (original)? How much material did the writer have about Melchizedek besides the Old Testament texts he chose to use in his midrash? The prior question might well be asked: Why did he choose Melchizedek as the subject of his exegesis? Did he see in Melchizedek the first priest of an order to which he now laid claim in the Zadokite priesthood? Was he simply applying his apocalyptic viewpoint to a personality who was mysterious even then? Did he have earlier records relating to Melchizedek from which he could draw different conclusions? (Here reference to the brass plates mentioned in the Book of Mormon is natural. Alma 13 certainly supplies more on Melchizedek, as Alma referred his people to their scriptures, the brass plates).

The Qumran scribe's ideas pull away from other Jewish notions. **He sees a heavenly Melchizedek who will execute divine judgment in the future eschatological Jubilee year**. He is seen in company with a "heavenly council" and is its leader. He will "exact the vengeance of the judgments of El (God) from the hand of Belial (Satan)." [3] He is the "herald upon the mountains proclaiming peace." James A. Sanders points out that this same cluster of scriptures is related in the Epistle to the Hebrews to Christ, but that this 11Q Melch fragment is the earliest known instance of their being interwoven in this manner. "The heavenly Son of God of Hebrews 7, who rules above all heavenly and earthly powers, and lives forever to make intercession for those who put their trust in him, has his counterpart now in the heavenly Melchizedek at Qumran." [4]

One can see how Melchizedek fits into this typology. It is he who oversees the release of Abraham's prisoners and accepts Abraham's tithe. In Psalm 110 his priesthood is characterized as "eternal," so his officiating in the world to come and overseeing the release of prisoners there would be a natural sequence. This Qumran author, however, sees the priestly calling of Melchizedek clearly (thus differing from his brother who copied or composed the Apocryphon). For him the priesthood transcends the limits of mortal life and Melchizedek becomes a towering redemptive figure rivaling the characterization frequently made of Michael, the great general in the final heavenly overthrow of Satan.

According to this text Melchizedek acts under the direction of El, who judges the people. A significant passage in the text finds El (the highest God), in the midst of elohim (other "gods") in his council, and another Elohim (who is Melchizedek). The text reads: "as it is written . . . concerning him in the hymns of David who says, Elohim (Melchizedek or the holy one) standeth in the assembly of El (God) among the Elohim (the holy ones, the court of heavenly beings) he judgeth." [5]

The Nag Hammadi Library, discovered in Upper Egypt, is a collection of fifty-two religious books, a few found still in their leather bindings, copied on papyrus sheets around A.D. 350–

400, though the originals may have been written as early as the second century. The Christians who composed or copied them came from an unmistakable Jewish heritage. Many of the works claim to offer secret traditions about Jesus which were hidden from the masses. Often early followers of Christ were condemned by other Christians as heretics. Certainly those being condemned did not think of themselves as heretics, but probably regarded their texts to be as sacred and true as any of the Gospels which were circulating at about the same time. Much of the writing of the apostolic fathers was directed against such groups. Soon they found themselves under even more direct attack. Possession of their books became a criminal offense, and, when discovered, their writings were burned. Thus we understand a possible reason for hiding the library found at **Nag Hammadi**. Its books had been banned.

It is appropriate to provide a preliminary explanation concerning two of the words often used to describe this library: Coptic and Gnostic. Coptic is the language of the texts and is most simply described as Egyptian written in Greek letters. Gnostic is the label we now give the early Christians who claimed hidden knowledge. Elaine Pagels describes gnosis in a way that may sound familiar to Mormons:

As the gnostics use the term [Gnosis] we could translate it as "insight," for "gnosis" involves an intuitive process of knowing oneself. . . . According to the gnostic teacher Theodotus, writing in Asia Minor (c. A.D. 140–160), the gnostic is one who has come to understand "who we are, and what we have become; where we were . . . whither we are hastening; from what we are being released; what birth is, and what is rebirth." Yet to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God; this is the secret of "gnosis." [6]

Until this discovery near Nag Hammadi, knowledge of the Gnostics was limited to the polemics of the early church fathers who sought to discredit them. These small Gnostic groups were convinced that they possessed a secret knowledge which was not available to the uninitiated. It was not based, they claimed, on scientific inquiry or philosophy, but came to them through revelation. The Nag Hammadi Library is of great importance, since scholars were previously dependent on secondary sources, namely, the critical writings of the fathers. Now from Nag Hammadi the original documents of the Gnostics speak for themselves. Apparently, these secret writings were originally open only to a few initiates.

It is interesting that since 1977, even the English translation of the Nag Hammadi Library is open to any who wish to study it. Werner Foerster, in commenting on the value of these documents, suggests that "the newly discovered documents as primary sources preserve the passages which were omitted by their opponents or perhaps not correctly reproduced." [7]

The discovery of these documents is causing a reappraisal of the beginnings or formative years of Christianity. We now know Gnosticism was more complex than had formerly been assumed. For years the Gnostics were considered en masse as a heretical movement and were dismissed

as anti-Christian. But some of the findings in the Coptic Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi (e.g., the Gospels of Thomas and Philip) open the possibility that some strands of the Gnostic movement may have been at the very center of original Christianity and cannot be so easily dismissed. The secrecy under which the Gnostics worshipped prohibited a sure knowledge of their ritual, but these latest findings show a singular emphasis on priesthood authority, baptism and other ordinances, and perhaps temple ritual. Within this context Melchizedek emerges.

The Melchizedek Tractate [8] is very fragmentary, for some pages contain only two or three isolated words, which add no meaning to the text. Uniquely, this text is written in first person. There are four references to Jesus Christ by name. In these references Jesus is referred to as the "Son of God" and "the commander in chief of the luminaries." Melchizedek is mentioned at least five times and is several times referred to as "the true high priest of God, Most High." It should be noted that this terminology parallels that used in Genesis 14 and Hebrews 7. The tractate begins with a fragment that speaks of truth revealed; then the words proverb and parable (p. 43, [1], 20, 21, 25) seem to refer to the Gnostic doctrine of hidden wisdom revealed to a select few through an understanding of different layers of meaning in the parables. Another reference near the beginning of the tractate is to "female gods" and "male gods" (p. 45) together with "angels," which brands the writings as Gnostic, since "female gods" are not mentioned in an orthodox context. Christ is referred to in several fragments but not always by name. He is spoken of as dying and on the third day rising from the dead. Another interesting section reflects belief in a physical resurrection and is obviously **anti-Docetic**:

They will say of him that he is unbegotten though he has been begotten, (that) he does not eat even though he eats,

(that) he does not drink even though he drinks,

(that) he is uncircumcised though he has been circumcised,

(that) he is unfleshly though he has come in flesh,

(that) he did not come to suffering, [though] he arose from [the] dead (p. 49, [5], 2–11).

His power to grant eternal life to others is often referred to. The "high priest" is mentioned in many sections of the tractate, but it is not always clear whether the reference is to Melchizedek or to Christ. References to the ordinance of baptism are found in several places but are so brief as to be difficult to identify strictly, and may refer to ritual washings (p. 57, [8], 2–3; p. 55, [7], 27). Water is mentioned in two instances in connection with baptism. A very interesting and more complete fragment tells of a "father of the All" who "engenders, men, all of them, in heaven and upon the earth." [9] Another fragment contains the words Eve and the tree of knowledge and Adam in the garden of Eden setting (pp. 59–61, [10], 1–6). This might have been part of a ritual drama. [10] On the first page of the tractate a "garment" is

mentioned: “I will put on as a garment . . .” (p. 43, [1], 10–11), which could refer to ritual garb worn by initiates or priests in performing and participating in their rituals. Theodor Gaster enlarges on ritual garments in his work Thespis. [11] Another fragment includes the names “Adam, Enoch and Melchizedek” in that order. Although there are only a few other words on the page, could the very order of the names refer to priesthood dispensations? [12] (Joseph Smith includes the same three names in DC 84:14–16.) There is reference to “two who have been chosen” just a few lines under the “Adam-Enoch-Melchizedek” citation. Again, there is no way to know the indentity of the “two.” The promise is made to them that “at no time nor in any place will they be stricken by friends or enemies” (pp. 63–65, [13], 1–5). This brings to mind the two witnesses of Revelation 11:3–11 who lie in the streets of Jerusalem. With the reference to “enemies” the text seems to turn to concepts of war. The next fragment, which is more complete, speaks of the Savior, who “will take them away and everyone will be overcome, . . . He will destroy death” (pp. 65–67, [14], 4–9). Then appears a caution not to “reveal to anyone” the hidden things except they be one of the initiated group. The fragment which is most complete concerning Melchizedek begins with the mention of “angels of light” and revelation. Just before the passage concerning Melchizedek it reads:

. . . When he came [he raised] me up from ignorance and (from) the fruitfulness of death to life. For I have a name, I am Melchizedek, the Priest of [God] Most High; I [know] that it is I who am truly [the Image of] the true High priest of God Most High (p. 69, [15], 4–13).

One of the most complete sections in the tractate is as follows:

I have offered up myself to you as a sacrifice, together with those that are mine, to you yourself, O Father of the All, and those whom you love, who have come forth from you who are holy and [living]. . . . I shall pronounce my name as I receive baptism . . . for ever among the living and holy names and in the waters, Amen (p. 71 [16], 7–16).

The use of the word name in the two passages above is intriguing. Could it refer to the “name” cited in Revelation 3:12? “And I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my god, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God; and I will write upon him my new name.”) The context in Revelation is one of “him that overcometh,” which is closely parallel with the Melchizedek passages we are considering. [13] The last fragment about Melchizedek reads:

They said to me, “Be [strong, o Melchizedek], great [High-priest] of God [Most High over us who made war; . . . .] they did not prevail over you and [you] endured, and [you] destroyed your enemies (p. 83 [26], 2–9).

It is interesting in this regard to note that in our understanding of the ordinances baptism is prerequisite to priesthood ordination. Birger Pearson has commented on this point:

It is probable that this ritual complex—baptism, offering of sacrifice, reception of the name (“Melchizedek”)—is to be understood as a priestly consecration. . . . These ritual actions fit into a pattern that harks back to ancient Mesopotamian priestly-royal ritual, and which can also be seen to be operative in Jewish texts, most notably T. Levi 8, as well as Mandaean ritual (see Widengren, “Heavenly Enthronement,” esp. pp. 552 and 558). The important thing here is that baptism is part of the rite of priestly consecration, just as it is in T. Levi 8. [14]

In the preceding quotation the Qumran warrior Melchizedek is paralleled, and he is once more described as “great high priest of God, Most High [‘El’elyon]”. Melchizedek is again the center of attention (“they said to me”) as others address their pleas to him. The use of the first person is unusual in this and the “I have a name . . .” segments. Could these be fragments of either a temple ritual or a priesthood ordination ceremony? And why is Melchizedek found at Nag Hammadi? His presence at Qumran could be explained as a prototype for a Zadokite priesthood which was championed there or as part of a conserved tradition. At Qumran he is viewed as a heavenly apocalyptic personage. At Nag Hammadi there is some of this same quality, as comparisons have shown. But the Nag Hammadi materials couple Melchizedek and Jesus Christ with a strong identification between the two. (As mentioned above, it is difficult to tell which “high priest” of the two is meant in many passages.) Sanders defends the idea that “the heavenly Son of God of Hebrews 7 . . . has his counterpart now in the heavenly Melchizedek at Qumran.” [15] If this is true, then that relationship is further cemented in the Nag Hammadi tractate, where Jesus Christ and Melchizedek appear almost interchangeably, as messiahs, bearers of an everlasting priesthood, commanders of a righteous legion, celebrants of a personal sacrifice, coming off triumphant after overcoming all. Such sentiments could place the Gnostic writer of this piece not nearly so far afield from original Christianity as some of his more extreme brethren whose secret knowledge caused the church fathers such discomfort.

Can you picture, in some future day, a dusty scholar (researching Melchizedek in the twentieth century) coming upon a dog-eared copy of a Melchizedek Priesthood Handbook and, after some digging, a partial copy of the Book of Mormon which included Alma 13, but never finding a copy of Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, though it still lay buried and intact? He might

well ask, “What are writings about Melchizedek doing at Salt Lake City?”—and, considering his finds, what possible conclusions could he draw about us or Melchizedek?

Notes

[1] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave 1 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1966), 9–10.

[2] Ibid., 65–66.

[3] Compare D&C 88:112–15, where Michael is seen in a similar role, gathering together the hosts of heaven to fight the devil and his armies which he has gathered. Verse 115 reads, “For Michael shall fight their battles, and shall overcome him who seeketh the throne of him who sitteth upon the throne, even the Lamb.”

[4] James A. Sanders, “Cave 11 Surprises and the Question of Canon,” in New Directions in Biblical Archaeology, ed., Noel Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 114–15.

[5] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “Further Light on Melchizedek from Qumran Cave 11,” Journal of Biblical Literature 86 (March 1967): 26.

[6] Elaine Pagels, The Gnostic Gospels (New York: Vintage Books, 1981), xix.

[7] Werner Foerster, Gnosis, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 7.

[8] The Melchizedek Tractate. References throughout this section of our text are to numbering in Birger A. Pearson’s translation of Nag Hammadi Codices IX and X, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981).

[9] Compare Psalm 82:6, “I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High.”

[10] Hugh W. Nibley, “What Is a Temple?” The Temple in Antiquity (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1984), 25.

[11] Theodor H. Gaster, Thespis (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950), 270–71.

[12] Compare Edgar J. Goodspeed, The Apocrypha (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), Wisdom of Ben Sirach 44:3, passim.

[13] Compare Exodus 23:21, “. . . for my name is in him.” Abraham 1:18, “Behold, I will lead thee by my hand, and I will take thee, to put upon thee my name, even the Priesthood of thy father, and my power shall be over thee.”

[14] Pearson, 26.

[15] Sanders, 115.