

Newsletter June 2019

In our commentary on the Revelation, we discovered through a careful study of the text in Chapters 4 and 5, that the twenty-four elders before God's throne cannot with certainty be proven to be leaders of the Church as is commonly assumed by today's dispensationalists. It is only because John Darby placed the Rapture prior to the beginning of Chapter 4, that this seems possible. We had to set aside this assumption, inasmuch as a concealed Rapture is obviously not recorded in Scripture. It could only be substantiated by unassailable proof that the twenty-four elders are members of the Church. Their number of precisely twenty-four only contributed to the difficulty of determining their identity. We asserted that these elders could be Old Testament saints of high rank and office. Even so, we still encountered great difficulty when attempting to identify which if any of the Old-Testament saints they could be. None seemed to fit this heavenly group of men conclusively.

We also noted that these twenty-four elders stated that they had been made "priests and kings." This is recorded in the text of Revelation 5:10 in a past tense, thus indicating that this dual title had been conferred upon them earlier, most likely upon the earth, before they had attained their present position before God's throne in Heaven. This dual title is very problematic inasmuch as throughout the Old Testament, the offices of priest and king were held to be completely separate and sacrosanct. So much so that civil rulers and kings such as King Saul, who had presumed to encroach upon the duties of the office of priest, were severely punished by God – many suffered death if they crossed that line. Likewise, the priests of the Levitical priesthood were not to become entangled in civil affairs, but were to exclusively devote their lives to representing the people of Israel before God through their Temple ministrations.

In this Newsletter, we shall explore the possibility that the elders could have been members of the mysterious order of Melchizedek. This subject becomes so deeply involved in supposition and textual interpretation that we chose not to discuss it in the limited context of our commentary as leading to a possible identity of the twenty-four elders. Some Bible expositors insist there was a select order of Old Testament men who uniquely held a valid title of both priest and king. If so, there is a shadowy mystery surrounding that order that Scripture does not completely reveal to us nor resolve to our satisfaction. So much so that many others insist that this order has not and does not actually exist at all. As a consequence, undertaking this discussion of this mysterious shadowy order carries with it the risk of introducing error by addition, while to neglect it could make us culpable of blame through the error of omission.

We shall now undertake this subject matter with no small amount of trepidation, as we contemplate the mysterious "Melchizedek" of the Old Testament along with its possible implications. Even the word "Melchizedek" is a rather awkward Hebrew construct, which is apparently derived from two Hebrew root words: *malki* (or *melek*), which is generally interpreted to mean "king," and *tsedek* meaning "right," "moral," or "righteous." Put together, *Malki-tsedek* is thus interpreted "king of righteousness" (cf. He.7:2).

"Melchizedek" is first mentioned in three isolated verses of Genesis 14, again in Psalm 110, and finally in a flurry of verses in Hebrews 5,6, and 7 in connection with Jesus Christ as our great eternal King and High Priest. We shall begin our study with the three verses found in Genesis 14:18-20, but before we do so we shall provide a proper Scriptural background for them, which is recorded in Genesis 14:1-17. In brief, a raid had taken place in which four kings of an eastern land had attacked the five small kingdoms established near the Dead Sea in the land of Canaan. The four kings of the east prevailed in the attack and extracted spoils and captives from the five kingdoms of Canaan. Having done so, they began their victorious journey home.

One of the Canaanite kingdoms that was pillaged was Sodom in which Abraham's nephew Lot lived, and he and his family were among those taken captive. When Abraham heard of this, he gathered together 318 trained men of his household and gave rapid pursuit. In a surprise two-pronged attack, Abraham was victorious over what must otherwise be viewed as an overwhelmingly superior enemy. Abraham returned the spoils and the captives, including Lot and his family, to their homelands. He adamantly refused to take any booty for himself for having done so – especially not from the king of Sodom who had offered it to him in accordance with the ancient law of Hammurabi.

After this event is described, comes these three enigmatic verses seemingly out of nowhere and without any explanation:

“And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: and blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all” (Ge.14:18-20).

Here we read that Melchizedek was both a “priest of the most high God,” and that he was also the king of an earthly city-state named Salem. He thus held a unique dual title of priest and king. The writer to the Hebrews later refers to this Melchizedek as the king of righteousness and of peace, and indirectly refers to Salem as the city of peace:

“For this Melchisedec, king of Salem, priest of the most high God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings, and blessed him; To whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all; first being by interpretation King of righteousness, and after that also King of Salem, which is, King of peace; (cf. He. 7:1, 2).

It has been generally assumed that Melchizedek who came out to meet Abraham was this man’s name, but it is probably better understood that Melchizedek was a title that had been bestowed upon this man who was the king of a city-state of Salem during the time of Abraham. It must be stated that there could have been many small city-states about the area in that day, and more than a few could have claimed the name Salem. However, a once Jebusite occupied city-state was the walled city that Israel’s King David later conquered to be the capitol city of his nation and to house the Tabernacle of God. David renamed the Jebusite city-state “Jerusalem.” At a later time David wrote concerning it, “In Judah is God known: his name is great in Israel. In Salem also is his tabernacle, and his dwelling place in Zion” (Ps. 76:1,2). Thus, we find that Salem (Sion or Zion), can be seen to correspond directly to David’s city of “Jeru-salem,” which could in fact have once been the very city in which Melchizedek was king and priest at the time of Abraham.

We find when we confer to the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews that Melchizedek apparently constituted an “order,” so interpreted from the word Greek *taxis*, which can be defined as an arrangement made through time or a long succession of rank. This has caused, some expositors to speculate that the existence of an “order of Melchizedek” means that many men had previously held this high office during specific periods of time throughout the ages. In their times, men holding this unique dual title were enabled to consult directly with God as a priest representing mankind, while they simultaneously exercised legal dominion over an earthly realm and its population as a king.

The first man seen to actually occupy such a powerful office was Adam, who was created fully mature having no antecedents or beginning of days (cf. He.7:3). God not only bestowed upon Adam dominion over the earth, He also granted him full access to his divine person, as He walked with him in the garden. Adam properly held the high office of priest and king as the federal head of the entire human race, as he exercised that dominion in close fellowship with God for many days – possibly many years or even decades – before Satan arrived upon the scene to successfully seduce Eve to disobey God. Disastrously, Adam followed Eve’s leading, such that he likewise sinned and rebelled against God. In doing so, he had so abused his intended function on earth that the exercise of his authority and the privilege of his dual office of priest and king necessarily came to an abrupt end.

Nevertheless, some speculate that the vacated office itself continued on through a successive order of other men acting as “place holders” until one day a sinless man would come forth to claim it forever. That man, of course, would be Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who is also very much the son of man for whom the office had been held in trust through a long line of mortal men.

Adam’s rebellion brought forth the curse of death upon the entire human race such that it is supposed that his title was later conferred upon Seth, the third son of Adam to ensure its continuation after Adam’s death. Although Seth brought forth what the Scripture refers to as a godly line of men, he still carried within him an inherited sin nature such that he too must die – even as did Adam. Therefore, before the death of Seth, the title was presumably conferred upon Enoch, of whom it is written that he walked closely with God. Next the title was possibly conferred upon Methuselah. Then, it would seem most certainly to have fallen upon Noah, inasmuch as God had determined to severely judge the evil inhabitants of the earth with annihilation in a massive global flood and to continue the human race through him. It must be understood however that all of this succession is mere speculation inasmuch as Scripture does not confirm any such line of continuation of Adam’s office.

Following the flood, Noah began to age, and the office of Melchizedek presumably fell upon Shem, one of the three sons of Noah. Shem lived a total of 600 years, about 100 years before and about 500 years following the great flood. Therefore, it would seem that it could have been Shem who was still living, held the office of Melchizedek, brought forth bread and wine, and blessed Abraham. However, there is considerable controversy regarding Shem in this capacity, which appears to find its only confirmation in an unreliable non-canonical book. Moreover, it must be noted that the writer to the Hebrews describes Melchizedek as having no mother or father (cf. He.7:3), which Shem most assuredly did; his father was in fact Noah and his mother Noah's wife.

Furthermore, it must be noted that the likelihood of Shem being a contemporary of Abraham is based upon an Old Testament translation derived from the Masoretic text. It was compiled by Rabbinical Jews in the seventh to tenth century AD from an earlier Hebrew text that had existed in the first century. It was subsequently copied and edited as required to conform to the teachings of Rabbinical Judaism. It deviates in various ways from the earlier Hebrew text, the Greek Septuagint, as well as the recorded history of Josephus who would have had access to the earlier Hebrew manuscript as well as the Septuagint. Unfortunately, the AKJV, as well as most other Protestant Bibles, are largely based upon the edited Masoretic text, which can at times lead to some very unusual anomalies.

Concerning the descendants of Shem, a glaring omission of 100 years exists in the Masoretic text concerning each of the recorded ages of the fathers in Genesis 11:10-26 at the time their sons were born. As just one example of six altered verses, Genesis 11:12 reads in the AKJV, "And Arphaxad lived five and thirty years, and begat Salah." The Septuagint adds 100 years to the thirty-five years making it one-hundred thirty-five. By omitting this 100 years here and in five other verses, the text implies that all of Shem's recorded descendants up to Abram had died one after another within the greater lifetime of Shem. Although not impossible, this would be very unusual to say the least. In the earlier Hebrew manuscript, as is verified by the Septuagint, it is explicit that the sons and grandsons all lived well beyond the death of Shem, as would reasonably be expected. Therefore, the earlier unedited Hebrew manuscript apparently refutes any notion that Melchizedek could have been Shem, who had died long before Abraham was born to Terah.

If we consider the Septuagint to be a reasonably credible translation, it becomes impossible to be dogmatic about the identity of any of this shadowy line of priestly kings – assuming that the order ever existed at all on earth prior to the appearance of Melchizedek in Genesis 14.

As Jesus celebrated his last Passover meal with his disciples, He instituted at the very end of that feast a perpetual memorial to his death involving bread and wine. We find that Melchizedek of Genesis 14 could have shared something quite similar to this memorial with Abraham many centuries earlier. Not surprisingly, some have attempted to identify Melchizedek as the pre-incarnate Christ, but this is not credible inasmuch as Jesus Christ cannot be a type or an antecedent of Himself, as the writer to the Hebrews plainly states (see below). Bread and wine was a common and essential food in that day, such that this verse could merely be saying that Melchizedek provided a refreshing meal of bread and wine, and perhaps additional food, to satisfy Abraham's hunger and thirst following his arduous victory and journey.

Nevertheless, we are told that Abraham paid tithes through Melchizedek as he would have only done if he recognized him to be a valid Stewart (i.e. priest) of God (cf. Ge.14:18-20). As the writer to the Hebrews later said of him, "Now consider how great this man was, unto whom even the patriarch Abraham gave the tenth of the spoils" (He. 7:4). By this supposed ritual act of Melchizedek, some assume that Abraham became the next "office holder" of the order of Melchizedek.

It is further presumed that Abraham later transferred this dual office to Isaac who in turn conferred this blessing upon Jacob. We could then presume by that reasoning that Jacob in his old age conferred this office upon Joseph through his blessing, and continuing on that the office of Melchizedek eventually was assigned by God to Moses, who led the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage. None of this sequence is provable and after this series of men, any rational effort to trace this order any further becomes increasingly difficult or even impossible.

Turning now to the epistle to the Hebrews, we must understand at the outset that the author is speaking to Hebrew Christians who have been neglecting the assembly of the Church in favor of continuing Temple worship. They are thus in great danger of falling back into the old rituals of Judaism – including the now blasphemous offering up of blood sacrifices through the Levitical priesthood. They are doing so even as the day is rapidly

approaching when all practice of the sacrificial law will come to an abrupt end in AD 70 along with the total destruction of the entire Temple complex by the armies of Rome (cf. He.10:25).

The author to the Hebrews is not attempting to define Melchizedek in this epistle. He is speaking of the superiority of Christ by comparing Him to Melchizedek of Genesis 14 who represented a type of royal priesthood that predates and is therefore superior to the Levitical priesthood. A high priest who is “without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually” (He.7:3). “And as I may so say, Levi also, who receiveth tithes, payed tithes in Abraham. For he was yet in the loins of his father, when Melchisedec met him” (He.7:9,10). The writer is demonstrating here the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus Christ over the Levitical priesthood that had long ago paid tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham.

“And it is yet far more evident: for that after the similitude of Melchisedec there ariseth another priest, who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life. For he testifieth, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec” (He.7:15-17).

“As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec” (He.5:6). The text referred to here is found in Psalm 110:4, in which the coming Messiah (i.e. the Christ) is described by David as a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek:

“The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool. The LORD shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies. Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth. The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek” (Ps.110:1-4).

The writer to the Hebrews continues on in considerable detail demonstrating how this title applies forever to Jesus Christ as the ultimate and last of this mysterious order (similitude or type) of Melchizedek:

“Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him; called of God an high priest after the order of Melchisedec” (He.5:8-10).

In conclusion, we find that Melchizedek could have indeed represented an ancient order in Salem, which had existed in some form on earth long before the Levitical priesthood was established. In the days of Melchizedek, as found in Genesis 14, the future Aaronic priesthood only existed in the “loins of Abraham.” That is the precise fact that the writer to the Hebrews sought to state. Jesus Christ was not of the Levitical priesthood that was temporary and imperfect, but was ordained by God to be the preeminent and eternal High Priest of unique position by reason of the” things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him.”

In conclusion, we must concede that it is barely possible that the twenty-four elders John saw seated before the throne of God in Heaven were once the priest-kings of an ancient order of Melchizedek, and that the elder or elders who spoke to John was a Melchizedek priest-king of old. We must humbly admit, however, that there is no sound Scriptural proof that this mysterious order is represented in Heaven by these twenty-four elders any more than there is any substantial proof that they are elders of the Church.

This is only one of the many mysteries of God that we cannot fully understand in this life. As the Apostle Paul confessed concerning the mysterious ways and means of our sovereign God:

“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable *are* his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsel. Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, *are* all things: to whom *be* glory for ever. Amen” (Ro.11:33-36).

Thus, we find that we have finally come full circle in our attempt to assign a precise identity to the twenty-four elders, and we can go no further. It must be enough for us to know for now that their identity is fully known to God who elevated them to their privileged position before his throne.

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