

December 29, 2002  
The Sunday After Nativity

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Old Testament provides a genealogy, at least in brief, for most of its "persons of the drama." The clear exception is Melchizedek, who suddenly enters the biblical story in Genesis 14 and just as abruptly leaves it. Nothing whatever is said of his ancestry, the rest of his life, or his death. Melchizedek simply appears "without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life" (Hebrews 7:3). In fact, Genesis 14 tells us only five things about him.

First, Melchizedek was a king. "Salem," the city of his kingship, was an old name for Jerusalem (Psalms 76 [75]:2). Indeed, the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, took Melchizedek to be the founder (\*ho protos ktisas\*) of the holy city (The Jewish War 6.438). Speculating on the etymology of Melchizedek's name (\*melek-hassedeq\*), Josephus calls him a "righteous king" (\*basileus dikaios\*) (Antiquities 1.10.2).

Exploiting the resemblance of the name "Salem" to the Hebrew word for "peace," \*shalom\*, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews calls Melchizedek "king of peace." Like Josephus, he sees etymological symbolism in Melchizedek's own name, calling him "king of righteousness" (\*basileus dikaiosynes\*) (7:2).

Second, Melchizedek was "the priest of God Most High." In fact, he is the first man to whom Holy Scripture gives the title "priest" (\*kohen\*), and it is Melchizedek's priesthood that receives the greater attention in the Bible. For example, while the Book of Psalms speaks of the Messiah's kingship as derived from David (Psalms 78 [77]:70; 89 [88]:3-4,20,39,45; 110 [109]:1-3), the Messiah's priesthood is said to be "according to the order of Melchizedek" (110 [109]:4).

Melchizedek was "the first to serve as priest to God" (\*ierasato to Theo protos\*), Josephus wrote, and long before Solomon built a temple at Jerusalem, Melchizedek had already done so (\*to hieron protos deimamemos\*). Indeed, Josephus traces the very name of Jerusalem (in Greek \*Hierosolyma\*) to the "priest of Salem" (\*hierus Salem\*) (The Jewish War 6.438).

Following the lead of Psalm 110 (109), the author of Hebrews sees in the priesthood of Melchizedek the "order" (\*taxis\*) of the definitive priesthood of Christ the Lord (5:6,10; 6:20; 7:17). The Bible's very silence with respect to the death of that ancient priest of Salem is taken as a prefiguration of the "unchangeable priesthood" (7:24) of God's Son, to whom Melchizedek was "made like" (7:3). The latter was a living prophecy of the definitive Priest who "has become the surety of a better covenant" (7:22).

Third, Abraham gave a tithe to Melchizedek, just as Abraham's children gave tithes to the Levitical priests (7:8-10). That detail argues for the superiority of the "order of Melchizedek" over the "order of Aaron" (7:11).

Fourth, Melchizedek blessed Abraham, saying: "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand" (Genesis 14:19-20). This priestly blessing too indicates the superiority of the "order of Melchizedek," inasmuch as "the lesser is blessed by the better" (Hebrews 7:7).

Fifth, Melchizedek "brought out bread and wine" (Genesis 14:18). His offering of bread and wine, moreover, was recognized as a priestly act; that is to say, Melchizedek did this precisely "because he was" a priest (as is clear in the Septuagint's \*en de\* and the Vulgate's \*erat enim\*).

Melchizedek's offering of bread and wine, of course, was a type and prefiguration of what transpired that night when God's priestly Son took the loaf of bread and the cup of wine into His holy and venerable hands and identified them as His Body and Blood. This is how the Christian Church has always interpreted the act of that first priest, Melchizedek, "who gave the wine and bread, the sanctified food, as a type of the Eucharist (\*eis typon Eucharistias\*)" (Clement of Alexandria, Stromateis 4.25). Melchizedek was the "type of Christ, and he offered the same gifts that prefigured the Mystery" (John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis 36.3). "Who had the bread and wine?" asked Ambrose of Milan. "Not Abraham," he answered, "but Melchizedek. Therefore he is the author of the Sacraments" (De Sacramentis 4.10). The living memory of Melchizedek thus abides deeply in the worship of the Christian Church.

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**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**

[phri@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phri@touchstonemag.com)

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