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Melchizedek or 'King of Righteousness'

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In 1965 A. S. van der Woude published the text of 11QMelchizedek along with his comment and interpretation.¹ This document appears to identify Melchizedek with the archangel in charge of God's heavenly hosts, elsewhere often called Michael. At the end of days Melchizedek will come in judgment and deliver the righteous from captivity to Belial, the angelic leader of the forces of evil. The discovery of 11QMelchizedek has caused many scholars to re-evaluate their understanding of Melchizedek as presented in Hebrews 7. A relationship between 11QMelchizedek and Hebrews 7 seemed all the more attractive because many claimed to see other points of contact between Hebrews and the Qumran documents.² These similarities caused some scholars to argue that the recipients of Hebrews were former Qumranites or that they had been influenced by people similar to the Qumran sect. Longenecker is representative of those who believe that the first readers of Hebrews held views about Melchizedek similar to those of 11QMelchizedek. He argues that one of the basic concerns of Hebrews was

¹ A. S. van der Woude, 'Melchizedek als himmlische Erlösergestalt in den neugefundenen eschatologischen Midrashim aus Qumran Höhle XI', *OTS* 14, 1965, 354–73. For additional literature on 11QMelchizedek see Paul J. Kobelski, *Melchizedek and Melchireša'* (CBQMS 10; Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1981) 1–23, nn. 1–6, 11.

² For the literature relating the readers of Hebrews to the people of Qumran see Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989) 29, nn. 220, 222. For a survey of the various religious backgrounds that have been proposed for Hebrews see Mikeal C. Parsons, 'Son and High Priest: A Study in the Christology of Hebrews', *EQ* 60, 1988, 195–200.

... the need to set out the superiority of Jesus the high-priestly Messiah over the Archangel Warrior-Redeemer figure of Qumran messianology, who was evidently being turned to again by his addresses in their desperation to find something or someone upon whom to build their hopes.³

Purpose and Approach

It goes considerably beyond the scope of this study to address the broader question of the identity of the recipients of Hebrews. Rather it is our purpose to show that the differences between 11QMelchizedek and Hebrews are so significant that any close contact between the authors or readers of these documents was unlikely. Furthermore, although we agree that 11QMelchizedek calls the archangel leader of God's forces Melchizedek, we will argue that it does not identify him with the Melchizedek of Gn. 14:17–20 and Ps. 110:4. Rather, it helps us to understand how that identification was made in later speculations.

Differences between 11QMelchizedek and Hebrews

In actuality, there is very little similarity between the Melchizedek figures in 11QMelchizedek and Hebrews. Melchizedek is the name given to both figures. Both figures appear to be, in some sense, more than mere human beings. Beyond this point each is developed in a very different way and within a different context.

Kobelski summarizes well and concisely two significant differences between 11QMelchizedek and Hebrews 7. Melchizedek has a different function in each document:

In 11QMelch, Melchizedek is above all God's warrior and judge. He is the one who leads the heavenly forces of light against the power of darkness at the end of time. In Hebrews, Melchizedek is, first of all, the eternal priest whose priesthood is likened to that of Jesus. There

³ Richard Longenecker, 'The Melchizedek Argument of Hebrews: A Study in the Development and Circumstantial Expression of New Testament Thought', in *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology: Essays in Honor of George E. Ladd* (ed. Robert A. Guelich; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978) 176–77. The following articles have a similar approach to the relationship between 11QMelchizedek and Hebrews: M. de Jonge and A. S. van der Woude, '11QMelchizedek and the New Testament', *NTS* 12, 1966, 301–23, esp., 322–23; Yigael Yadin, 'A Note on Melchizedek and Qumran', *Israel Exploration Journal* 15, 1965, 152–54; J. A. Fitzmyer, 'Further Light on Melchizedek from Qumran Cave 11', *JBL* 86, 1967, 25–41.

are no traces in Hebrews of the military or forensic images that characterize 11QMelch.⁴

Also, each of these documents has a different relationship to the OT texts about Melchizedek:

Hebrews, on the one hand, appeals directly to the biblical evidence about Melchizedek; the preserved portions of 11QMelch, on the other hand, do not even allude to the biblical sources regarding Melchizedek.⁵

These two differences are important for our argument. But there is one other difference that should be noted—the significance of the name 'Melchizedek' for each document. Since the use of this name is the basic reason for discussing a relationship between 11QMelchizedek and Hebrews, a difference in its significance is very important.

It is common knowledge that Hebrews, Philo, and Josephus all understand 'Melchizedek' to mean 'King of Righteousness'—from the Hebrew roots *mlk*, 'king', and *šdq*, 'righteousness'. 11QMelchizedek seems to have the same understanding. Our main contention is this: While the interpretation of 'Melchizedek' as 'King of Righteousness' plays no significant part in the argument of Hebrews,⁶ this interpretation is the key to a proper evaluation of 11QMelchizedek. Indeed, instead of merely transliterating, we should probably translate 'Melchizedek' as 'King of Righteousness' if we are going to properly understand 11QMelchizedek. First we will present evidence demonstrating why Melchizedek should be understood as 'King of Righteousness'

⁴ Kobelski, 128. The only possible direct reference to priesthood in 11Q-Melchizedek occurs in lines 5 and 6. Fred L. Horton, Jr. has conjectured 'priest of El' in line 5 after the word 'Melchizedek'. However, the only clear letter is a koph. His reconstruction is not followed by others. See *The Melchizedek Tradition: A Critical Examination of the Sources to the Fifth Century A.D. and in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SNTSMS 30; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 69, 70. Line 6 does seem to cite 'to make atonement' from Dn. 9:24 (see below), and line 8 appears to explain Dn. 9:24 by saying that Melchizedek will 'make atonement' for the 'children of light' in the 'tenth year of jubilee'. This is parallel to his proclaiming 'liberty for them' and setting 'them free' (line 6). But this mention of atonement need not identify Melchizedek as a priest.

⁵ Kobelski, 128.

⁶ Why does the author of Hebrews interpret 'Melchizedek' as 'King of Righteousness' and 'King of Salem' as 'King of Peace'? Attridge's suggestion (189) is as reasonable as any:

Perhaps he introduces the traditional etymology because righteousness and peace evoke messianic imagery, thus implying that the figure of Melchizedek refers to more than a historical personage in ancient Canaan.

rather than as a personal name when used for the chief good angel in the Qumran context. Then we will show why 'King of Righteousness' is a particularly apt title for the chief good angel in 11QMelchizedek. Throughout the rest of this study 'righteous' and 'righteousness' in citations from the Bible or from Qumran translate Hebrew words from the root *šdq*.

It is most appropriate that we understand Melchizedek as 'King of Righteousness' when used of the chief good angel at Qumran. This suggestion is supported by several factors: (1) 'King of Righteousness' is parallel in form to other names for the chief good angel at Qumran—such as 'Prince of Light(s)', (CD V, 18; 1QS III, 20) and 'Angel of Truth', (1QS III, 24). (2) The men of Qumran designated themselves by names that corresponded to the names of their angel. Just as they called themselves 'sons of light' (1QS I, 9) II, 16; III, 13, 24, 25; IQM I, 1, 3, 9, 11, 13, cf. 4Qflor 8); and 'sons of truth' (1QS IV, 4, 6; cf. XI, 11; XVI, 8); so they referred to themselves as 'sons of righteousness' (1QS III, 20, 22). Their human leader was the 'Teacher of Righteousness'. (3) Furthermore, Melchizedek is written as two words in 11QMelchizedek—Melchi Zedek (*mlky šdq*), just as 'Prince of Light(s)' and 'Angel of Truth' are in other Qumran documents. By contrast, in the Genesis Apocryphon from Cave 1, where Melchizedek is the person who met Abraham, his name is written as one word. (4) The appearance of Melchiresha' (*mlky rš'*, 'King of Wickedness', in 4QAmram and 4Q280 as a name for the chief evil angel makes it all the more likely that we should give full significance to the meaning of Melchizedek's name. Melchiresha' is also written as two words.

But why does our particular document, 11QMelchizedek, call the chief archangel, 'King of Righteousness'? It has been suggested that 11QMelchizedek uses this name to emphasize his priestly character.⁷ This suggestion is doubtful, since 11QMelchizedek makes no clear reference to Melchizedek's priestly activity⁸ and has no extant reference to the OT passages which speak of the priest Melchizedek. We are suggesting that the author of 11QMelchizedek uses this name because of what he understands it to mean—'King of Righteousness'. We will first show why it is appropriate for the archangelic leader of God's forces to be called 'King' in 11QMelchizedek, and then why king of 'righteousness'.

11QMelchizedek appears to proclaim this chief good angel

⁷ Kobelski, 71.

⁸ See footnote 4 above.

'King' (*mlk*) or to announce his reign. Line 24 quotes 'Thy heavenly one is king' or 'Thy heavenly one reigns' from Is. 52:7. Most scholars are agreed that the lacuna in the last part of line 25 and the first part of line 26 probably identified Melchizedek with the 'heavenly one' in the Isaiah reference. Thus, these verses proclaim that he is king or that he reigns.

But why is he called king of 'Righteousness' (*šdq*)? We have already given reasons above for the general appropriateness of this term. But it seems particularly relevant in this document because of the function Melchizedek here performs. When he comes at the end of days and is proclaimed king he will judge the wicked and bring salvation to the righteous. In a number of OT passages God's righteousness is associated with this final judgment and deliverance. Some of these passages are closely associated with the biblical quotations in 11QMelchizedek. Furthermore, the men of Qumran themselves used 'righteousness' with this connotation. Perhaps the chief good angel is here called 'King of Righteousness' because when his rule is proclaimed at the end of days he will finally establish 'righteousness' by judging the wicked and vindicating the righteous.

Let us turn our attention to the biblical quotations in 11QMelchizedek. They are interpreted in reference to the final judgment of God on the wicked and the final deliverance of the righteous. These two themes are connected by means of Is. 61:1–3. Note how 'righteousness' is used in the contexts from which some of these quotations come.

11QMelchizedek associates the final judgment/deliverance with a 'last year of jubilee'. Dn. 9:24–27 forms an important parallel with this eschatological jubilee release. 11QMelchizedek line 6 seems to allude to Dn 9:24: '[to atone] for iniquity'. The very next phrase in Dn. 9:24 is 'and to bring in everlasting righteousness'.⁹

⁹ Below is the translation of 11QMelchizedek lines 5, 6 given by M. de Jonge and A. S. van der Woude, 303. Original underlining, which indicated uncertain readings or conjectures, has been omitted. Present underlining shows where these lines refer to Dn. 9:24:

... Melchizedek, who (6) will bring them back to them and he will proclaim liberty for them to set them free and (to?) *make atonement* for their sins ... this word (7) in the last year of jubilee (8) to make atonement therein for all children of light and for the men of the lot of Melchizedek.

Compare Dn. 9:24 (RSV), with underlining added to show the phrase picked up by 11QMelch line 6:

Seventy weeks of years are decreed concerning your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to *atone for* iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place.

Line 11 quotes from Ps. 7:8 (Hebrew 7:9), 'God shall judge the nations.' In Ps. 7:9 (Hebrew 7:10), the very next verse, God is described as 'righteous' and is called on to bring the wickedness of the wicked to an end and to establish the righteous according to His Own righteous character.¹⁰

Lines 10 and 11 cite Ps. 82:1-2. This psalm does not use the term 'righteousness' as such, but it does emphasize the related concept of 'justice' both in the condemnation of the wicked and the deliverance of the righteous. Ps. 82:3 uses the hiphil imperative of the verb root from which 'righteousness' comes—'maintain the right of'.¹¹

And of course in Is. 61:3 the purpose of the anointed of the Spirit's proclamation of salvation is that those who mourn in Zion may be called 'oaks of righteousness', and in 61:10 'robe of righteousness' is parallel with 'garments of salvation' provided by God. In v. 11 the Lord God will cause 'righteousness' and praise to spring forth 'before all the nations'.

Now turning to the Qumran documents themselves. 1QS III, 13-IV, 26 shows that the final salvation of the righteous is closely connected with and dependent on the destruction of the wicked and of the spirit of perversity. Several passages bear witness to the connection between the righteousness of God and this final

¹⁰ 11QMelchizedek lines 10-13 as translated by M. de Jonge and A. S. van der Woude, 303. Original italicising, which indicated uncertainty or conjecture, has been omitted. Present italicising indicates scriptural quotation.

Concerning him in the hymns of David who says: *The heavenly one standeth in the congregation of God; among the heavenly ones he judgeth* [Ps. 82:1], and concerning him he says: *Above them (11) return thou on high; God shall judge the nations* [Ps. 7:7, 8]. And that which he says: *How long will ye judge unjustly and accept the persons of the wicked? Selah* [Ps. 82:2]. (12) Its interpretation concerns Belial and the spirits of his lot which . . . ?? . . . of God?? . . . (13) and Melchizedek will avenge with the vengeance of the judgments of God . . . from the hand of Belial and from the hand of all the spirits of his lot.

Ps. 7:7-9 (RSV). Italicised phrases are cited in 11QMelchizedek lines 10, 11. *Let the assembly of the peoples be gathered about thee; and over it take thy set on high.* (8) *The Lord judges the peoples; judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness and according to the integrity that is in me.* (9) *O let the evil of the wicked come to an end, but establish thou the righteous thou who triest the minds and hearts, thou righteous God.*

¹¹ Ps. 82:1-4 (RSV) is given below. Words italicised are cited by 11Q-Melchizedek lines 10, 11 (see n. 11 above).

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment; (2) 'How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? (3) Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.'

salvation of the righteous and destruction of the wicked. See particularly 1QH XVII, 20–21 where the 'redemption' of the singer of the hymn and the 'end of the wicked' are closely connected to the 'righteousness' of God. Of particular interest are 1QH XIV, 15b–16, where the destruction of the wicked is the revelation of the 'righteousness' of God and 1QM XVIII, 8 where the 'God of Justice (*šdq*) brings deliverance from the Kittim.

4Q Tanhumim (4Q 176) appears to open with a pesher on Ps. 79:2, 3.¹² These verses from the psalm describe Jerusalem destroyed by its enemies. The pesher comments on the 'blood' of God's saints shed like water 'all around Jerusalem', and on the 'bodies' with 'no one to bury them'. Several features from the fragmentary interpretation might lead us to believe that God's deliverance of His people from this situation and his judgment on their enemies is being described. For instance, line 1 begins with the phrase: 'and perform thy wonder and righteousness among thy people'. Line 2 speaks of contending with 'kingdoms over the blood of'. Lines 4 and 5 apply the 'comfort' and deliverance described in Is. 40:1–5 to destroyed Jerusalem. If this is indeed the thrust of this pesher, then it refers to God's deliverance/judgment as his performing His 'righteousness among thy people'.

In CD XX, 20–21 the future 'salvation' and 'righteousness' of 'those who fear God' are parallel. Finally, in 1QM XVII, 6–8, when Michael's authority is raised among the angels and Israel's dominion among all flesh is raised up, then 'justice' (*šdq*) rejoices on high, and the sons of truth are glad.

Summary

11QMelchizedek differs from Hebrews in several significant ways. It makes no reference to the priesthood of Melchizedek or to the OT passages which mention him. A most important difference is the significance that the interpretation of Melchizedek as 'King of Righteousness' has for this document. We probably interpret 11QMelchizedek more correctly if instead of transliterating the name Melchizedek we translate it as 'King of Righteousness'. 'King of Righteousness' fits in very well with other designations used for the chief good angel in 11QMelchizedek, which proclaims the reign or kingship of this archangel at the end of days. At that time he will judge the wicked and deliver the

¹² See John M. Allegro and Arnold A. Anderson, eds., *Qumran Cave 4: I (4Q158–186)* (Discoveries in the Judaean Desert of Jordan, vol. 5; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 61.

righteous. Both in the OT and in the Qumran writings God's 'righteousness' is associated with this final judgment and deliverance. How fitting that the angel whose rule brings final judgment/deliverance be called the 'King of Righteousness'.

Conclusions

We wish to suggest, on the basis of these observations, that the author of 11QMelchizedek did not intend to identify the archangelic leader of God's forces, sometimes called Michael, with the Melchizedek of Gn. 14:17-20 and Ps. 110:4.¹³ That is why there is no reference to these OT passages or to priesthood. Rather, he called him Melchizedek because he wanted to designate him 'King of Righteousness'. This was a natural Qumran title for the chief good angel. It was appropriate for the eschatological function that he would play at the end of the age, a function described in 11QMelchizedek. If this is so, then 11QMelchizedek is not a witness to an existing speculation about the biblical Melchizedek. It may, however, give us a clue to the source of the medieval rabbinic speculations which identified the Melchizedek of the OT with the archangel Michael.¹⁴ Perhaps Michael was first called Melchi Zedek, 'King of Righteousness'. Then, because he was called Melchi Zedek, he was later identified with the OT Melchizedek. The mysterious character of Melchizedek in Gn. 14:17-20 and Ps. 110:4 may well have facilitated this process.

This interpretation of 11QMelchizedek further distances it from the Epistle to the Hebrews and makes any connection between their understandings of Melchizedek less likely.

¹³ Note Horton, 79, 80:

We do not have enough of the document left . . . to say (apart from the conjectured reading of line 5) that the Melchizedek of the 11QMelchizedek and the Melchizedek of Gn. xiv and Ps. cx were considered by the author to be one and the same.'

For Horton's conjectured reading in line 5 see n. 4 above.

¹⁴ M. de Jonge and A. S. van der Woude, 305.