



The Enigmatic מֶלְכִי־צֶדֶק Melchizedek

Stephen Lambden (rev. Oct. 2013).

Under revision and completion.

וּמֶלְכִי־צֶדֶק מֶלֶךְ שָׁלֵם הוֹצִיא לֶחֶם וַיִּגֵן וְהוּא כֹהֵן לְאֵל עֶלְיוֹן:

וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרוּךְ אַבְרָם לְאֵל עֶלְיוֹן קֹנֵה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ:

וּבְרוּךְ אֵל עֶלְיוֹן אֲשֶׁר־ מִגֵּן צָרֶיךָ בְּיָדְךָ וַיִּתֶּן־ לּוֹ מִעֲשֹׂר מִכֹּל:

“And **Melchizedek** (מֶלְכִי־צֶדֶק) king of Salem (מֶלֶךְ שָׁלֵם) brought forth bread and wine: he was [is] the priest (cohen) of the Most-High God (El-Elyon = כֹּהֵן לְאֵל עֶלְיוֹן). And he blessed him [Abram = Abraham], and said, "Blessed be Abram to 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 tithe from all". (Genesis 14:18-20).

Pre-Islamic prophets are occasionally elevated to high positions and accorded unusual places and datings in the chronological and cyclic schemata of Ismā'īlī and other heterodox or extremist Shī'ī literatures. A transformed biblical Melchizedek, `King

of Righteousness', the enigmatic "priest of El-Elyôn (the Most High God, Gen. 14:18), is mentioned in three books of the Bible (Gen. 14:18b; Ps. 110:4; Heb. x 10). He also figures in an eschatologically oriented Qumran text 11QMelch. (11Q13; 1st. cent. [B]CE?) where he appears as an archangel, a Michael-like figure who acts as an agent of God in eschatological times. In certain streams of the Jewish, Targumic literatures and Rabbinic writings, Melchizedek is identified with Shem, son of Noah.

Melchizedek is several times mentioned in one of the books of the New Testament, the pseudo-Pauline *Epistle to the Hebrews* (late 1st –early 2nd cent. CE). Therein he is said to be, "without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life" (Heb 7:3). Like Melchizedek, Jesus, the Son of God is represented as an eternal priest, a "priest forever after the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 7:17 = Psalm 110:4). The founder of Christianity is seen as more than a Levite or member of the Aaronic priesthood of ancient Israel (see Heb. 7:8ff).

Various Christian and non-Christian gnostic texts also mention Melchizedek, among them the Christian gnostic *Pistis Sophia* ("Faith-Wisdom", c. 4th cent. CE) and one of the Nag Hammadi tractates entitled Melchizedek (NHC IX.1f; 2nd-3rd cent. CE?). This latter, gnostic redacted text contains heavenly revelations given to Melchizedek whom it seems to identify with the suffering Jesus who is to appear at the eschaton as the triumphant Melchizedek (Giverson & Pearson, NHL, IX.1:438ff). Some gnostic groups, most notably the Melchizedekians revered Melchizedek whom they regarded as a divine Power superior to Christ.

Though not mentioned in the Q. or in mainstream Islamic literatures containing Islamo-biblical, *Isrāīliyyāt* ("Israelitica") or *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (Stories of the Prophets) materials, Melchizedek figures in *Ismāīlī* as well as in Bahāī prophetology. Unmentioned in the *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* of Tha`labī (d. 1035 CE) and that of al-Kisāī (fl c.

9th-13th cent. CE?) he neither figures in major mainstream Shīṭī prophetologies nor in that of most heterodox Shīṭī factions such as that of the Nusairis (Alawis) or the Druze. Melchizedek does, however, have a role in certain texts held scriptural by the Iranian Nizarī Ismāʿīlīs. This latter group has its roots in the late 5th/11th cent. split centering on the position and succession to Ḥasan-i Sabbah (d. 518/1124) who broke relations with the Fāṭimids of Egypt in support of al-Nizar, the eldest son of the Fāṭimid Caliph [Imam] al-Mustansir (d.487 /1094).

In his *Melchisédec dans la Mythologie ismaélienne* the late Georges Vajda drew attention to the importance of Melchizedek in a few Nizarī Ismāʿīlī texts. In the *Haft Bāb-i Bābā Sayyid-nā* ("Seven Chapters of Father, Our Master" c. 1200 CE) through a translated and transliterated Syriac-Arabic version Genesis 14:18, there is set forth the doctrine of the cosmological supremacy of three 'incarnations of divinity' named, (1) Malik Šalim (= King of Salim [Peace]), (2) Malik Yazdak [= Melchizedek], and (3) Malik al-Salam [King of Peace]. Reflecting certain heterodox Qumran and Judaeo-Christian traditions, these divine incarnations are pictured as being manifested during the eras of Adam, Noah and Abraham. It is reckoned that the second of them, Malik Yazdak will appear as a Judge in eschatological times (Vajda,1943-5).

The present writer has not found any references to Melchizedek in the writings of the Bāb or Bahā'-Allāh though `Abd al-Bahā and Shoghi Effendi both acknowledged the *maḥhariyyat*, ("Manifestationhood"), the exalted theophanological status of this originally biblical figure. According to an oral statement of `Abd al-Bahā recorded in a now obscure Bahāʿī publication dating to around 1900, `Abd al-Bahā recognized the prophethood of Melchizedek on the basis of the fact that Abraham gave him tithes (Gen.14:20b) according to the 7th chapter of the (pseudo-) Pauline Epistle to Hebrews. Possibly as a result of this statement there exists a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, the great grandson of Bahā'-Allāh and Bahāʿī *valī-yi amr Allāh*, `Guardian of

the Cause of God' (from 1921-1957) dated July 13th 1938 in which the following reference to Melchizedek is found:

Melchizedek was certainly a prophet, but we do not know even the approximate date of his appearance, or even where he appeared (cited UHJ letter to S. Lambden, 6th April 1982).

The reference in Heb. 7:3 to Melchizedek being "without father, without mother, without descent" probably accounts for what is written at the end of this letter expressive of the opinion of Shoghi Effendi. It may also be that the developed Bahā'ī appropriation of Melchizedek as a *mazhar-i ilāhī* ("Manifestation of God") also has non-Isma'ili roots in the speculations of such early American Bahā'īs as Ibrahim Kheiralla (Khayr-Allāh 1896:xxxv). Alternatively, Shoghi Effendi may have influenced or been influenced by the place of Melchizedek in a prophetological "chart" developed by the Bahā'ī American writer Ruth Moffett (1880-1978), possibly on the basis of oral statements made by Shoghi Effendi himself. Somewhat like the ancient Melchizedekians and Nizari Ismā'īlīs, Bahā'īs exalt Melchizedek to an incredibly high theophanological position; that of a pre-existent divine manifestation. As noted this elevated status would seem rooted in his relationship to Abraham as spelled out in Genesis 14 and other expository traditions.

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