After the Order of Melchizedek: Royal Themes and Melchizedek Traditions Applied to Jesus by the Author of Hebrews

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The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews presents Jesus as a high priest analogous (to an extent) to the Aaronid high priests who traditionally officiated at the temple, offering sacrifices and entering the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. However, he explains that the Aaronid priests were only an “example and shadow of heavenly things” (Heb 8:5); their ordinances were “patterns of heavenly things” (Heb 9:23), but were “carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation" (Heb 9:10), and could not help believers obtain “perfection” (Heb 7:1). The author dedicates much space (most of chapters 5–10) to demonstrating how Jesus’ priesthood is superior to that of the Aaronid/Levitical priesthood. Whereas the contemporary Jews traced their priesthood back to Aaron, whom they saw as the first high priest, Hebrews presents Jesus as a priest after the order of the more ancient Melchizedek (Heb 7:21).

Jesus’ Melchizedek-type priesthood involved, for example, some of the following aspects: ascending to heaven to appear in the presence of God (Heb 9:24), performing priestly duties in heaven (Heb 7–9), having the power of an endless life (Heb 7:6), holding an unchangeable priesthood for ever (Heb 7:24), being Son of God (Heb 5:5), and being enthroned at His right hand (Heb 1:13). Although Jesus is compared positively to the ancient figure of Melchizedek, we get the sense that Jesus is not equal to, but superior to Melchizedek. In chapter 7, the text expounds on the figure of Melchizedek, who the author sees as an historical figure who was “made like unto the Son of God” (Heb 7:3). This can be interpreted to mean that Melchizedek both prefigures but also is modeled after Jesus Christ, the Son of God, “the true celestial high priest.”

From where does the author of Hebrews derive his notions of the priesthood of Jesus? Why does he compare Jesus to the mysterious figure of Melchizedek, whose name appears only twice in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 14:18–20; Ps 110:4)? The author must have been familiar with the significance of Jesus being a

Melchizedek High Priest instead of Aaronid. The early Christians must have known of traditions that allowed them to connect Jesus to Melchizedek.

In the past few years, the topic of Jesus as high priest and the traditions that allowed the author of Hebrews to create the relationship between Jesus and Melchizedek that he does, have been given increased attention. This topic was, for example, treated extensively at a conference on Hebrews held at the University of St Andrews in 2006.

At the conference, convened by Richard Bauckham, Trevor Hart, and Nathan McDonald, one of the papers relevant to this topic was presented by Eric Mason of Judson University, who argued that the closest parallels to the view of Jesus’ role and priesthood as depicted in Hebrews are to be found in the Dead Sea Scrolls' traditions regarding Melchizedek. A more complete exposition of Mason’s views was published as a monograph on the topic by Brill in 2008.

Although I am convinced that Mason is correct in many of his arguments, and that his overall emphasis on the shared views between Hebrews and the Qumran texts is certainly appropriate, he also spends a substantial portion of his monograph downplaying (although not necessarily dismissing) the connections that previous scholars have made between Hebrews and other texts and traditions, such as those of Jewish thinkers like Philo, the Gnostics, or pseudepigraphal texts like 2 Enoch. Although many of his assertions against these are surely justified, his efforts to narrow the focus regarding the origins of the traditions informing the author of Hebrews to a few texts from Qumran can (although not necessarily his intention) be seen to obscure some trends of Jewish and Christian thinking that can likewise be seen to parallel some of the ideas in this work. As Mason himself states, “Admittedly no textual dependence of Hebrews on a Qumran document can be produced. What can be considered, though, are hints of shared views in the Qumran texts and Hebrews.”

Although there are clearly many instances where ideas in these Qumran texts are comparable to the traditions espoused in Hebrews, there are other ancient texts where “hints of shared views” can be identified and should be explored. It is the purpose of this paper to expound on some of the many traditions that may have contributed to the author’s bold view of Jesus and his priesthood and mysterious connections to Melchizedek that are employed by the author of Hebrews.

3 Ibid., 193.