

# Abraham's Children

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Anyone familiar with the art of Cathedrals and Churches in Europe will know that someone called Melchizedek figures prominently. Who was he?

After rescuing Lot from captivity, "Malchizedek" (note the difference between Malchi and Melchi) king of Shalem, brought out bread and wine. He was a priest to God on High and he blessed Abraham who then gave him a tenth of everything (Genesis 14:18-20). This is the only reference to Malchizedek in the entire Bible. And it implies that Abraham was not the only monotheist in his day, which opens the door to the theory that there were other monotheistic traditions in his day.

So, who was Malchizedek? If he worshipped the same deity as Abraham, why does the Jewish tradition maintain that Abraham was the first person to recognize the one true God?

In the Second Temple and early post-Temple eras, Malchizedek became the subject of many new ideas. The Dead Sea scrolls and Rabbinic Midrash both said that he was one of the four smiths of Zechariah's vision (2:3), together with Messiah son of David, Messiah son of Joseph, and Elijah (Sukah 52a). More commonly Malchizedek was identified as Shem, the son of Noah (Seder Olam 21).

What induced the rabbis to create this new role for Malchizedek? It is likely that they identified him with Shem to explain why the Bible gave such prominence to a non-Israelite priest who served God in Canaan during the Patriarchal period. If Malchizedek was Shem, and the Land of Canaan was given to Shem's family after the Flood, then this would solidify their legitimate claim on the land. While certain rabbinic texts describe Abraham as a revolutionary and innovative figure in the history of world religion (Berakhot 7b), others portray the faith of the Hebrew forefathers as an uninterrupted continuation of the original true faith of Adam.

The Midrash explained that the kings of the world met at the Valley of Shaveh and wanted to elevate the victorious warrior-chieftain Abraham to a god-like status. By paying homage to Malchizedek, Abraham was, in effect, renouncing the status proposed for him and reasserting God's supremacy in the world. Ramban, Nachmanides, suggested that the Bible here explains the

religious legitimacy of Abraham's paying the customary tithe. Had the king of Shalem been a heathen, Abraham would not have offered a tithe. Because the king was, instead, a worshipper of the true God, Abraham could legitimately pay the tithe. Rambam says that he was king of Shalem, which was Jerusalem (not Salem in Massachusetts) and this episode hints at the tithes that would later be brought there.

In Judaism Melchizedek is a very minor character. But in Christianity, now called Melchizedek with an "e," he figures much, much more prominently. In the New Testament, Melchizedek was an antecedent of Jesus. Jesus, like Melchizedek, was reconfigured as simultaneously priest, king, and messiah.

In the Nag Hamadi documents (early Christian and Gnostic texts discovered near the Upper Egyptian town of Nag Hamadi in 1945), Melchizedek was Jesus and lived, preached, died and was resurrected, to bring peace to the world.

Melchizedek is remembered in the Eastern Church on May 22<sup>nd</sup> and on the "Sunday of the Forefathers" (two Sundays before Christmas). In the Armenian Church he is commemorated as one of the Holy Forefathers on July 26<sup>th</sup>. The founder of Protestantism, Martin Luther, also taught that Melchizedek was an archetype of Jesus. All this explains his omnipresence in Christian art, as proof of Christian pedigree. Recent scholars have argued that the renewed interest and significance of Melchizedek in later Judaism, was simply an attempt to offer an alternative to the Christian Messiah.

There is no mention of Melchizedek in the Koran. Some later commentators such as the Indian Muslim scholar, Abdullah Yusuf suggested a link between Melchizedek and Khidr a mystical king. The Ismaili sect saw Melchizedek as one of the 'Permanent Imams.'

Why, you may ask, am I going into all of this? Because both Christianity and Islam claimed to supersede Judaism, whether through the idea that they had replaced the Old Testament or that they were the possessors of the true and authentic final revelation. Yet they both claimed to be the true descendants of Abraham. For them Melchizedek represents a link to the authentic, past. Contempt for the Jews because of their failure to adhere to the ancient revelation and their blindness in not accepting the new, was often a theological justification for anti-Semitism

Times have changed. In much of the Christian and Muslim religions it is now acceptable to say we all share an Abrahamic origin. Even if they each think they have a New revelation or Covenant. They can still refer to Judaism,

sympathetically as an elder brother. We are still living in a world of ideological conflict in which the disease of anti-Semitism is spreading virally. In the West at least. this is now coming less from religion and more from politics.

Stripped of theological polemic, Malchi or Melchi Zedek represents the commonality and shared roots that are the way of going forward towards reconciliation and combating poisonous hatred. Both in Christianity and Islam we are now seeing more and more prominent leaders advocating reconciliation. Those on all sides who work tirelessly towards this end, such as my brother Rabbi David, deserve enormous praise and encouragement. We have been forced by circumstance and history to gaze at our own navels a little too much.