

## Jesus in Genesis: In the Order of Melchizedek

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Genesis 14:8-24

When you first hear it, this story about Abram and Melchizedek that I'm about to read will seem to have nothing to do with Jesus. It will be a very un-Christmassy story and you will wonder why I am preaching on it. Well, like all the other passages in this series, I'm preaching on this passage because this passage and the events portrayed in it actually do point to Jesus. We know that because the New Testament says so! Specifically, the book of Hebrews says so. The author of the book of Hebrews links Jesus and Melchizedek. Hebrews 5:10 says that 'Jesus was designated by God to be a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.' Jesus is like Melchizedek. Jesus is in the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek anticipates Jesus. How so? Let's read.

We just read an ancient story of Middle Eastern kings and tribal chiefs clashing. Thomas Friedman's book, *From Beirut to Jerusalem* tells a story of more modern Middle Eastern kings and tribal chiefs clashing during the conflicts of the 70's and 80's. One of the chiefs is former Syrian president Hafez Assad. Assad is dead now. His son Bashar is in charge of Syria, but for years their family has held power in that country and they've done it with ruthless determination. The Assads have not been shy about killing people.

Just to give you a flavor of how Hafez Assad operated, Friedman tells the story of a meeting between him and a Lebanese Druse tribal chief Walid Jumblat. The meeting was remarkable because in 1977 Walid's Father had been assassinated by Syrian agents in Lebanon, and everyone assumed that president Assad had ordered the hit. Even so, Walid meets with the man who ordered his father's murder because he needs the favor of the powerful Syrian president.

Walid was ushered into Assad's huge office. Assad sat enthroned at his massive desk. Assad greeted him in a traditional Arabic manner, "Welcome! My House is your house!" Assad spoke warmly to Walid, like they were old friends. During the course of conversation, Assad suggested that he wanted Walid to take a certain position on a matter in Lebanon. When Walid was reluctant to take that position, when he pushed back a little, Assad looked at him lovingly with a thin smile and said, "Walid, I look at you sitting there and you remind me exactly of your dear father. What a man he was. What a shame he is not with us." Brutal. Assad made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Walid got the point.

In the book Friedman doesn't just tell that story to show that Assad was brutal; he tells the story to show Assad's effectiveness. It's because of exchanges like this that the Assads have held power for so long. This story represents a way of ruling, a way of governing, a way of wielding power that has always been used by kings, and not just in the middle east. It's a cold, calculating, 'by any means necessary,' kind of power. It's a ruthless, Machiavellian kind of power.

We see this kind of power operating in our passage. Our passage sets up a contrast between two different kings and two different kinds of power. In Genesis 14 Abram meets two different kings who represent two different ways of being in the world. One of them is the King of Sodom. Abram and the King of Sodom meet after a battle between local tribal chiefs who have been vying for power and control in the region. The big chief in the region is Kedorlaomer. He's like the Godfather of the region. Everyone is paying tribute to him. But in our passage, 5 kings, including the king of Sodom, rebel against Kedorlaomer. The Godfather is having none of this insubordination, so he gathers a few of his allies and goes to war. The king of Sodom and his fellow rebels are routed, they flee and many of them perish in the tar pits that litter the valley.

All this had nothing to do with Abram. He's not looking to get involved. Abram is not living like a tribal chief. He's not living out of this raw hunger for power and position; he's living by the promise. Abram is steering by the promise, and not by warlord ambition. He would have stayed out of this conflict altogether, except for the fact that when Kedorlaomer took home the spoils of war, he also took home Abram's nephew Lot. Uncle Abram is not pleased. He rounds up 318 men from his own household and goes at night to make war against the 4 kings. Miraculously, by the hand of God, he defeats the kings and he takes back Lot along with all the other spoils of war that Kedorlaomer had stolen from Sodom and the other cities.

The king of Sodom sees Abram's victory and he thinks that a new warlord has arisen in the region, a new chief, a new Godfather, and he's eager to get Abram on his side. He wants to make a deal with the new boss. You can imagine him coming up to Abram and kissing him on both cheeks. "Abram, my friend, mi goomba. My house is your house. Mia casa es su casa!" "I'm so grateful for you Abram, and as a token of my gratitude, if you return to me all the people taken from my city, and I will let you keep the spoils!" The King of Sodom wants to make a deal. He wants to enter into an alliance with Abram. The king of Sodom wants to put Abram in his debt with this gift. He wants to suck Abram in to his game of thrones.

Abram is not interested. He's not interested in getting sucked into those back room power games. "With raised hand I have sworn an oath to the Lord God Most High, creator of heaven and earth that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the strap of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, 'I made Abram rich.'" Abram knows that when you make a deal with the mafia, it looks good at the beginning, but pretty soon you're trapped in a web of brutality.

The other king who greets him is the mysterious Melchizedek, king of Salem. Melchizedek is such an interesting figure. His name means 'king of righteousness,' and he rules over Salem which means 'peace.' So he is the king of peace and righteousness. Not only is he a king; He is a priest, a priest of God most high. He follows Abram's God and ours and he's a priest of our God. Melchizedek seems to come from a different spiritual and physical place from the other kings of the region. He's not involved in the battle; he's not caught up in the warlord games. He's not caught up in all the deal-making, the fighting, the intrigue. He comes from Salem; literally he comes from a place of peace, and out of that place he brings Abram a gift and a blessing. He offers bread and wine for Abram and his household who are hungry and tired after the battle. And then he raises his hand in blessing and says, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High!" Melchizedek's gift is not strategic. He's not trying to make an alliance. It's food and a blessing. It's pure generosity. It's an offering of grace.

The text sets up a contrast between these two ways of power; these two ways of being in the world. The king of Sodom represents the Hafez Assad way of ruling, the raw power of will, desire and the sword. In this kingdom power starts with human desire and it works itself out through will and force. What kind of power does Melchizedek represent? The way of promise. The way of blessing and grace. In this kingdom, power starts with the blessing and promise of God, and then flows out of that with blessing and bread and wine. Abram refuses the way of Sodom and when he gives Melchizedek his tithe, ten percent of all he has, he reaffirms his commitment to the path of the promise.

These two ways of power, these two ways of being in the world, show up throughout history. You'll see it again when Moses stands before Pharaoh. The humble shepherd armed only with his staff and God's promises, facing down Pharaoh; Pharaoh with his brutal power and his genocidal policies. We'll see it again when David faces Goliath. Goliath with his sarcastic taunts and his raw physical power; David who won't wear armor or carry a sword, who chooses to face Goliath armed only with a slingshot and his faith. We'll see it again when Daniel stands before King Darius; when he prays towards Jerusalem instead of bowing down to Darius' idol of Persian power.

These two ways of power come to a head at Bethlehem. The same contrast shows up in the way Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth. The most familiar Christmas reading of all, the one which ends "she wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room in the inn" is also a passage that contrasts two kings. How so? Well, there are 2 kings in this passage too! Jesus is one of those kings. Already at his birth, Jesus is announced as a king. That's what the angel says to Mary, right? "He will be great and he will be called a son of the most high, The Lord God will give him the throne of his Father David and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever."

Who's the other King? It's Caesar. In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. Octavius Caesar Augustus. The Roman emperor. A man so powerful that he could compel an entire empire to drop everything they are doing, to travel to their hometown and register. What kind of power did Caesar represent? He was a warlord in the tradition of Kedorlaomer and the King of Sodom. He ascended to his throne through intrigue, calculation and ruthlessness. Here's an example of the kind of King Caesar was: I got this from one of John Ortberg's books. Augustus wrote his own autobiography, an autobiography modestly entitled: "The Achievements of the Divine Augustus." Here's a sample of the book: "Three times I triumphed at Oration. Twenty-one times I was named emperor. The senate

voted yet more triumphs for me, which I declined because of victories won by me, fifty-five times in my triumphs, kings or children of kings were led before my chariot. I was the highest ranking senator for 40 years. All citizens of one accord unceasingly prayed in every holy place for my well-being.” The man was not afraid to toot his own horn, and when he tooted that horn it was all about him and his power.

Contrast that with the other king in our passage. The one born to a peasant girl, wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a manger. The one who wasn’t even given a room at the local inn. The one whose palace was a stable and whose courtiers were shepherds. The one who came to give away his power for the sake of the world. Jesus is a very different kind of king. He’s the promised One. He’s the king at the center of the promise.

And now we are in a position to see what the book of Hebrews was talking about; this child is very much a king and a priest in the order of Melchizedek. Like Melchizedek, he comes to offer a blessing. Blessed are you poor in spirit. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are you who mourn. Blessed are all you broken and tired people. And, like Melchizedek, he comes to feed us. He gives us gifts of bread and wine. This is my body, this is my blood, given for you. He does what Melchizedek does. He fulfills what Melchizedek does. He is a priest and a king in the order of Melchizedek. Lying there in that cradle surrounded by shepherds, Jesus doesn’t look like he would be much of a threat to Caesar sitting on his throne in Rome surrounded by the Praetorian Guard. But make no mistake, this tiny child is the Son of God come to establish the kingdom of God. He is our eternal high priest. He is, as we will sing later, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. Caesar will die and Rome will fall into ruin, but Jesus shall reign forever and ever. Hallelujah.

I said earlier that Abram faced a challenge in this story. He was trying to live a life of faith based on a promise and he had to resist getting sucked into the way of the King of Sodom and the other warlords. It couldn’t have been easy for him. The promise wasn’t something he could see; a promise is this invisible thing that he had to trust. The pleasures and benefits of the way of the warlords were being dangled right in front of his face. They offered immediate gratification. I’m sure that’s why God sends Melchizedek to him. God sends Melchizedek to give Abram a blessing, some bread and some wine to help keep Abram’s hope alive. It’s just a little bread and wine, and a few words of encouragement, but it turns out to be enough to keep Abram faithful and focused, to keep him walking the path of the promise.

This same tension exists for all of us every day. We’re trying to live by the promise too. Every day we are trying to walk the path of this unseen promise, while avoiding the temptation of immediate gratification of power, pleasure and selfishness. Every day, in ordinary conversations, in regular choices, in the push and pull of life, we have to choose between the way of these two kings. Every day we can feel the push and pull between these two ways of being in this world. And as we try to stay faithful, this is our Melchizedek place. In this place, our great high priest does what Melchizedek did for Abram, only in a deeper and stronger way. He gives us a word of blessing and encouragement, and he feeds us with his bread and wine. He gives us eternal food, and the word of life. Those may seem like small things to you, but it is a gift of pure grace, and maybe you’ll find, as Abram did, that it’s enough to keep you going.

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