



# THE PRIEST-KING MELCHIZEDEK

*Biblical, archaeological and historical sources  
shed light upon the first known ruler  
of pre-Israelite Jerusalem*

Tony Larsson

Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Dec 2003  
Historical Geography of Jerusalem  
Dr. Shaul Sapir

<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	<b>PAGE</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>3</b>
GOALS OF THIS STUDY .....	3
<b>FOUNDATIONS OF THIS STUDY</b> .....	<b>4</b>
DATING MELCHIZEDEK .....	4
HISTORICITY OF THE BIBLE .....	4
IDENTIFICATION OF SALEM WITH JERUSALEM .....	5
MELCHIZEDEK AS AN AMORITE RULER .....	6
<b>THE AMORITES: MELCHIZEDEK’S PEOPLE</b> .....	<b>7</b>
MESOPOTAMIAN ROOTS .....	7
CONQUERORS OF PALESTINE .....	8
CULTURAL ACHIEVEMENTS .....	9
URBANIZATION .....	9
<b>JERUSALEM: MELCHIZEDEK’S KINGDOM</b> .....	<b>11</b>
LOCATION OF MELCHIZEDEK’S JERUSALEM .....	11
THE GIHON SPRING.....	12
THE OUTLYING REGIONS.....	13
EGYPTIAN INVASION .....	14
THE CITY WALLS .....	14
SUMMARY .....	15
<b>MELCHIZEDEK’S LEGACY: THE MESSIANIC PRIESTHOOD</b> .....	<b>16</b>
THE ABRAHAMITE ENCOUNTER.....	16
MELCHIZEDEK’S THEOLOGY .....	17
THE CONTINUING LEGACY .....	17
THE MESSIAH, PRIEST AND KING .....	19
<b>SUMMARY</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>22</b>

## Introduction

Among the Bible’s vast galleries of inspiring portraits, there is one compelling character that stands out from among the others – not through the wealth of details by which he is portrayed, but rather through being roughly sketched in a brief appearance that tantalizes the reader and sets his imagination running. His name is the priest-king Melchizedek, ruler of Salem and priest of God Most High, whom he served even before crossing paths with our father Abraham, the bearer of that special divine revelation that would give rise to the three great monotheistic world religions of today.

Melchizedek is forever remembered through his meeting with victorious Abraham, when the patriarch triumphantly returned from rescuing the captives of the land from northern oppressors. In three verses this meeting is described:



**A European artist’s impression of  
Abraham meeting Melchizedek**

Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine;  
he was the priest of God Most High.  
And he blessed him and said:  
“Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth;  
And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hands.”  
And he gave him a tithe of everything.  
(Genesis 14:18-20)

The importance of Melchizedek in the Bible far outweighs these three verses, though. Not only is he a Gentile servant of the true God whose priesthood is recognized by Abraham, a fact that calls for a mindset of humility among Jews and Christians who consider themselves the chosen bearers of a unique revelation – but more importantly, the awe-inspiring rolling of priestly and kingly powers into one supreme leader foreshadows the coming of the Messiah, who is described as “Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek”.<sup>1</sup>

### *Goals of this study*

In order to reach a deeper understanding of the person of Melchizedek, this study will augment the three verses from Genesis by drawing upon additional sources, considering both material evidence and written texts from pre-Israelite Palestine, in order to paint a fuller picture of Melchizedek as a historical person. Furthermore, we will also follow the usage of Melchizedek as a prophetic symbol throughout the Bible up to its fulfillment in the New Testament.

Because of the scarcity of written evidence from this era at the dawn of recorded history, the scope of this study is widened to include also the environment in which he lived, the people from which he sprang and the general political and economic situation of the region that he ruled. It is the author’s hope that the reader will find this study interesting, enlightening and edifying, and on that note he wishes to commit it into the hands of God.

<sup>1</sup> The Epistle to the Hebrews, 6:20 – see also Psalm 110:4, to which the above verse is an allusion.

## Foundations of this study

As we are about to go forth on a voyage of exploration into waters almost uncharted, a voyage to the very beginning of recorded history for the region of Palestine, it would be wise to begin our study by asking some methodological questions and clarifying the assumptions on which it rests, according to the headings below. If such things do not interest the reader, he is advised to skip on to the next chapter on page 7.

### *Dating Melchizedek*

As is customary among modern men who want to nail down cold facts instead of just enjoying the story, we shall begin by trying to find some indications of when Melchizedek ruled. Though it is hard to be precise about the date of any event taking place in the Torah as being the earliest part of the Bible, nevertheless the venerable system of the Irish bishop Ussher ventured to place Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek in the year of 1913 BC, purely on the basis of internal evidence.<sup>2</sup>



**Melchizedek supplying the returning warriors with bread and wine**

This date, presumptuous as it may seem by its exactness, at any rate indicates the placement of Melchizedek in the Middle Bronze Age. This placement is in fact confirmed by Anati (1962), who by correlating the Biblical account with archaeological findings finds it most logical to place the patriarch Abraham in the 20th or 19th century BC.<sup>3</sup>

The base of Anati's argument is that during patriarchal times, the city of Gerar in southwestern Palestine seems to be populated (see Gen 20:1-2), which it according to archaeological evidence was only after 2000 BC – thus fixing the pro quem of the time of the patriarchs. The ante quem depends on the foundation of the city of Hebron, which during Abraham's time consisted only of the "the terebinth trees of Mamre" (Gen 13:18). According to Numbers 13:22, Hebron was founded seven years before Zoan, the Hyksos capital in Egypt whose birth according to Egyptian sources can be placed in the late 18th century BC.

### *Historicity of the Bible*

However, all such reasoning becomes void if one accepts the view of some contemporary scholars who reject the historicity of the historical books of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>4</sup> Recounting the

<sup>2</sup> According to Thompson (1983).

<sup>3</sup> The base of Anati's argument is that during patriarchal times, the city of Gerar seems to be populated (Gen 20:1-2), which it according to archaeological evidence was only after 2000 BC – thus fixing the pro quem of the time of the patriarchs. The ante quem depends on the foundation of the city of Hebron, which during Abraham's time consisted only of the "the terebinth trees of Mamre" (Gen 13:18). According to Numbers 13:22, Hebron was founded seven years before Zoan, the Hyksos capital in Egypt whose birth according to Egyptian sources can be placed in the late 18th century BC.

<sup>4</sup> A view propounded by scholars such as Na'aman (1992), who prefer to rely on the objective data of material findings rather than literary works, which may be biased according to the agenda of the author. Though this method does seem to enable the scholar to work in a more scientific way, a note of caution should be raised: any

debate over Biblical criticism is definitely outside the scope of this limited study; it suffices to say that the following discussion assumes the general historicity of the Biblical account along with other scholars such as Shanks (1995) and Anati (1962):

The books of the Bible that concern the Hebrew Patriarchs cannot be considered mere legend... The Bible also yields an enormous amount of information on the political situation, the social organization, the economic bases, and the moral values and religious beliefs of this period.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Identification of Salem with Jerusalem*

The account in Genesis presents Melchizedek as being “king of Salem” (מֶלֶךְ שָׁלֵם), a name that traditionally has been understood as synonymous with Jerusalem (יְרוּשָׁלַיִם), being so interpreted in the parallelism of Psalm 76:

In Judah God is known;  
His name is great in Israel.  
In Salem also is His tabernacle,  
And His dwelling-place in Zion.  
(Psalm 76:1-2)

As this psalm can be dated to the time of king David (early 10th century BC)<sup>6</sup>, the identification of Salem with Jerusalem can be seen to be a particularly ancient one. This is the understanding that has been generally accepted and that will be used throughout this study.

Even so, an opposing view<sup>7</sup> will be briefly summarized. Genesis later on states that the patriarch Jacob arrived שָׁלֵם עִיר שָׁכֵם (Gen 33:18), which is usually translated “safely to the city of Shechem”. However, the Septuagint followed by the Vulgate<sup>8</sup> renders this verse as εἰς Σαλαμ πολιν Σικιμων, “to Salem, a city of Shechem”. According to the church writer Epiphanius in the late 4th century AD, such a village (by the name of Salim) really existed about six kilometers east of Neapolis (present-day Nablus, ancient Shechem).

However, even proponents of this view concede that “שָׁלֵם עִיר שָׁכֵם is not the usual way of locating a small town”, and it is improbable that the leader of a small village otherwise unknown would be referred to as a king. If Salem really was a village near the city of Shechem, it would have fallen under the authority of the king of that greater city. Moreover, Jerusalem with its southern location is a more probable meeting-place for the routed king of Sodom, who also was present at the meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek, than some faraway village up in the north – which is why this study assumes the correctness of the traditional identification of Salem with Jerusalem.

---

interpretation of the objective findings will of course be colored by the subjective mind of the archaeologist, depending for instance on his previous knowledge, his brain-child hypotheses and the origin of his sponsor money.

<sup>5</sup> Quotation from Anati (1962), pp. 377 and 384.

<sup>6</sup> This dating rests both on internal and external evidence: the psalm is written to celebrate a military victory of the united kingdom, Israel standing parallel with Judah, conditions best fitting the glorious reign of king David. Also, this lends credence to the note of authorship that ascribes this psalm to Asaph, David’s worship leader.

<sup>7</sup> Presented by Horton (1976), pp. 48-50.

<sup>8</sup> The ancient Greek and Latin translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, authoritative for the Orthodox and Catholic churches respectively.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.49.

*Melchizedek as an Amorite ruler*

Any objections raised against the next assumption will probably be fueled rather by the believer's religious sentiment than the scholar's cool passion for historical truth. Archeological evidence unequivocally point to Jerusalem being an Amorite city at the time of Melchizedek<sup>10</sup>, which is why this study assumes that the priest-king also would have been a member of the people that he ruled.

However, to the Bible reader the connection may seem unsettling, to associate the famous priest-king noble enough to be held up as a forerunner of the Messiah with an infamous people listed among the nations that the Lord God of Israel commanded his chosen people to wipe out from under the heavens<sup>11</sup>. Jewish traditions from the Second Temple period identify the lofty character of Melchizedek with the venerable Shem, son of Noah, who according to the genealogies of Genesis still was alive and well in the days of Abraham.<sup>12</sup>

But the evidence, both external and also internal from within the Bible itself, seems to be conclusive. The Book of Joshua tells about an Amorite king of Jerusalem at the time of the conquest (13<sup>th</sup> century BC) called Adoni-Zedek, which squares well with what we know about Amorite names from other sources. Being Semites, the Amorites used names such as Abam-ram (Abraham) and Jacob-el (Jacob)<sup>13</sup>, and therefore the name of Melchizedek fits well into an Amorite context.

So, having clarified the foundations of the interpretation given in this study, let us now move on and trace the roots of the priest-king Melchizedek and his people the Amorites.

---

<sup>10</sup> The pre-Israelite rule of Jerusalem by Amorites is also hinted at by the prophet Ezekiel, who when remonstrating the rebellious city reminds it of its checkered past, saying: "your father was an Amorite and your mother was a Hittite" (Ezekiel 16:3).

<sup>11</sup> See for instance Exodus 34:11-12.

<sup>12</sup> According to Hayward (1996). Such identifications of lesser-known biblical characters with more famous ones are not unheard of in the targums (interpretative translations of the Hebrew text to Aramaic), where Putiel can be identified with Jethro and Phinehas with Elijah (p. 74).

<sup>13</sup> According to Anati (1962).

## The Amorites: Melchizedek's People

In that great flow of intermingled destinies that make up the history of mankind, it is a futile work to try and extricate one single thread and study it in isolation from its surrounding context, just as it has been aptly said that no man is an island. In order to reach a deeper understanding of who the priest-king Melchizedek really was, we will sketch the history of his people the Amorites from their roots in Mesopotamia through their settlement into the land of Canaan up to the time of Melchizedek in the 19th century BC, spanning the Early and Middle Bronze Ages, an era of some 400 years. By drawing on both historical and material evidence, we shall try to properly set the scene before introducing the main character.

### *Mesopotamian roots*

It is generally accepted that the origins of the Amorite people are to be sought in the waste lands of present-day Syria, along the inner rim of the Fertile Crescent (an area running the length of the Euphrat and Tigris rivers from the Persian Gulf up to the Lebanese coast and then turning southwards into the land of Canaan).<sup>14</sup> This area they roamed during the third millennium BC as desert nomads in the style of modern-day Bedouins, occasionally making raids into the more fertile and densely populated lands of the northern neighbors the Sumerians.

This naturally did not make them popular with the more civilized Sumerians, among whom they were known as the “Martu”. One Sumerian song that has been preserved in written form until today describe the Amorites as dangerous bandits who live in tents and eat their meat raw.<sup>15</sup> Another Sumerian source, the writer Ibbi-Sin of Sur, calls them with a sniff of urban contempt “vagabonds who have never known what a town was”.<sup>16</sup>

However, in the Early Bronze Age around 2300 BC their source of easy income was taken over by the invading armies of the Akkadian people, led by the half-legendary king Sargon. In the face of increasing pressure, many Amorites migrated westwards and southwards into present-day Israel and Lebanon. But before continuing to follow the path of this group, it is interesting to note some points in the history of the Amorites who remained in their ancestral homeland.

For three hundred years they gradually grew in power, and at about 2000 BC they were able to overrun the Akkadians and take possession of the whole region of Mesopotamia, establishing the kingdoms of Babylon and Mari. As is often the case, the barbarian conquerors were civilized by the refined culture of their subjects and were finally able to produce more high-minded kings.<sup>17</sup> The most famous ruler among these cousins of Melchizedek is king Hammurabi (18<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries BC), forever remembered for his code of laws that he reported to have received by revelation from his patron, the sun-god.



**Hammurabi (standing) receiving his laws from the sun-god**

<sup>14</sup> See for instance Kenyon (1963) and Anati (1962).

<sup>15</sup> According to Anati (1962), p. 364.

<sup>16</sup> Quotation from Kenyon (1963), p. 34.

<sup>17</sup> See Keyes (1959), p. 18.

### *Conquerors of Palestine*

However, the segment of the Amorites moving southwards into Palestine around 2300 BC had not yet attained such moral heights. Meeting an established culture of thriving cities, they proceeded to eradicate this whole civilization and take over their natural resources, settling in the hill country of Judea and the more barren lands of Transjordan (which were probably more reminiscent of their northern homeland), from the river Yarmuk near the Sea of Galilee and down as far south as the river Arnon that flows into the Dead Sea.

An interesting written source of information about the Amorites of this eastern region is the autobiographical story of Sinuhe the Egyptian, who in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century BC left his position at Pharaoh's court to take up residence with an Amorite tribe in Qedem (Transjordan). He ended up marrying the daughter of the chieftain Ammi-Enshi and becoming part of the tribe, and his account sheds valuable light on daily Amorite life.

He describes Amorite cuisine at length, enumerating the different foods that they were able to grow in spite of their semi-nomadic lifestyle, such as figs, olives, grapes, barley and emmer. They had meat on the table by herding cattle or hunting in the desert. There was milk and honey in abundance, and bread and wine was part of the daily diet. Such was the life of the leaders of the eastern Amorites.

However, there was rarely peace to simply sit back and enjoy the comforts of life, as strife and warfare was common both against outsiders and also between the heterogeneous Amorite tribes that were made up of a hodgepodge of western Semites and Hurrians.<sup>18</sup> The warriors of Sinuhe's tribe fought mainly with bow and arrow, resorting to daggers if forced into close combat, while a warrior from the neighboring tribe that he faces is armed with spear and shield. He proudly boasts about his exploits in terms rather unpalatable to our modern ears:

Every foreign country against which I went forth, when I had made my attack on it, was driven away from its pasturage and its well. I plundered its cattle, carried off its inhabitants, took away their food, and slew people in it by my strong arm, by my bow, by my movements, and by my successful plans.<sup>19</sup>



<sup>18</sup> According to Mazar (1982), p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Quotation from Anati (1962), p. 386-387, which also is the source of the whole account about Sinuhe the Egyptian.



### *Cultural achievements*

The Amorites east of the Jordan gradually dwindled and disappeared, while the ones settling in the hill-country of Judea thrived and multiplied. They drove their flocks from pasture to pasture and for hundreds of years did not erect much in the way of permanent dwellings that could remain for us to excavate and to glean information from.

One cryptic source of knowledge about the Amorites of this era is the *menhirs*<sup>20</sup>, stone monuments that start to appear in the wilderness, probably serving memorial purposes. The raising of such monuments is referred to several times in the Bible from patriarchal times onwards.<sup>21</sup>

That the people of Melchizedek had a spiritual side and were far more than materialistic barbarians can be inferred from these menhir monuments, and even more from the hundreds of graves that date from this period. Unlike the previous dwellers of the land who had buried their dead in mass graves, intermingling the bones of whole clans, the Amorites show an emerging understanding of the individual's value by cutting out huge cave tombs, up to seven meters deep, for each person. Only occasionally are two people buried together, perhaps married couples.

The amount of work that these nomads put into the permanent dwellings of their departed loved ones imply a deep certainty about the importance of the afterlife. A niche was often carved out in the rock for an oil lamp. In about half of the graves found, men were found buried with a copper or bronze dagger, while women were adorned with beads of jewelry. Most of the other tombs contained no weapons, but instead a puzzling group of red-burnished pottery in the shape of small teapots, placed there for unknown purposes. The design of these vessels resembles that of similar vessels found in Akkadian graves of Mesopotamia, showing the cultural ties of the Amorites to the region they once left.<sup>22</sup>



**Amorite amphora**

### *Urbanization*

As time went by and the Early Bronze Age changed into the Middle Bronze Age, the nomadic Amorites found it increasingly convenient to settle down on the prepared sites of the cities that they had destroyed at their arrival.<sup>23</sup> This new lifestyle they learned from their northern cousins, who had conquered Byblos in modern-day Lebanon. Instead of eradicating the existing population, they had mixed with them and acquired their city-based way of life, and were henceforth known as Canaanites.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Mentioned in Anati (1962), p. 364.

<sup>21</sup> For instance after Jacob's revelation at Bethel (Gen 28:18-22), at the treaty between Jacob and Laban (Gen 31:45-55), at the crossing of the Israelites over the Jordan (Jos 4:1-9) and among the eastern Israelite tribes after dividing the land (Jos 22:10-34).

<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed treatment of Amorite burial customs, see Kenyon (1963), pp. 14-18.

<sup>23</sup> According to Gonen (1984), archaeological excavations has found evidence of 54 cities populated by members of the Canaanite-Amorite culture from this period (Middle Bronze Age), indicating a rather well-developed urban civilization. She describes the era as a time of flourishing, when cities were able to erect huge city walls that were practically indestructible.

<sup>24</sup> According to Kenyon (1963), p. 76.

The Canaanites lived in the lowlands, in an area encompassing the northern plains of Megiddo and spreading south both along the Jordan valley and the coastal plain, where their southernmost outpost was the city-state of Gezer, some 30 km west of Jerusalem. The hill country of Judea, to the east and south of Gezer, was Amorite territory with cities such as Lachish, Debir and Jerusalem springing up.

In reality, however, the boundaries were probably not that sharply defined. The archaeological findings from Middle Bronze Age Canaan show one single material culture from Judea to Galilee, with the same style of pottery, weapons, buildings etc. If a cultural boundary is to be drawn according to archaeological criteria, it would be along the river Jordan that separated the more primitive Transjordanian Amorites from their now-cosmopolitan kinsmen of Judea.

So when we arrive at the time of the Patriarchs in the Middle Bronze Age, we find it to be a time of change and of new beginnings. Two cultures coexist side by side, the age-old nomadic culture of shepherds and the stone cities that once more start rising towards the sky. The nomads, represented by the patriarch Abraham, pitch their tents by the city walls to trade and interact with the city-dwellers, represented by the priest-king Melchizedek.



**An example of Amorite art,  
a clay tablet depicting a  
harpist**

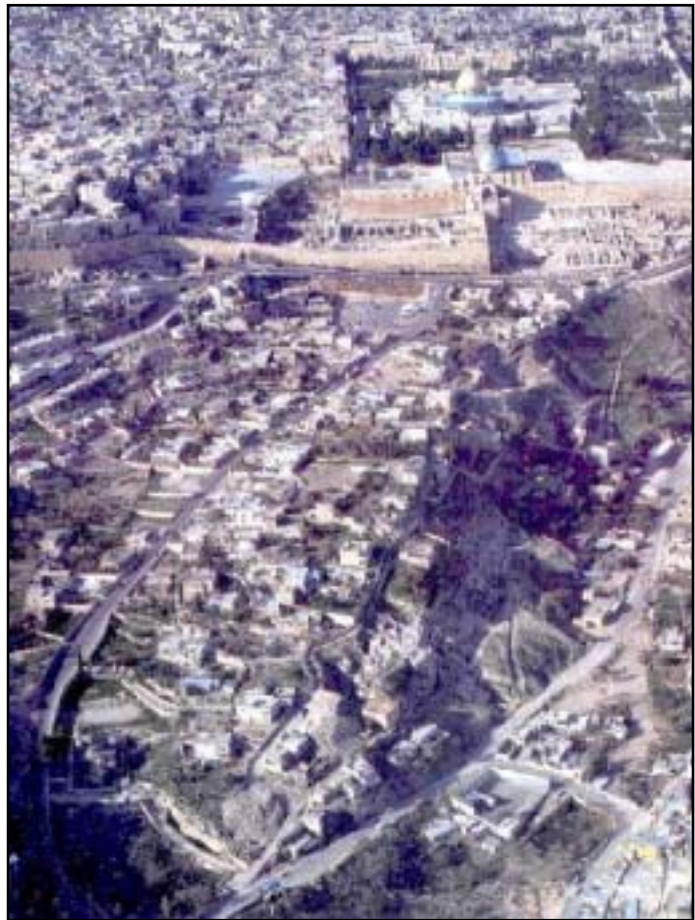
## Jerusalem: Melchizedek's Kingdom

The Holy City, today sacred to the three great monotheistic world religions that have sprung from the faith of Abraham, had a history long before the patriarch's meeting with Melchizedek, even before the arrival of the Amorites. Excavations have revealed pottery shards indicating the presence of human dwellers already in the Chalcolithic<sup>25</sup> period, 3500 BC. And even if these shards may have been left by nomads passing by, the findings indicate that permanent dwellings existed in Jerusalem at least from 2800 BC.<sup>26</sup> This is the date assigned to a stone house that was uncovered by the archaeologist Yigal Shiloh, probably belonging to the civilization destroyed by the conquering Amorites, who, when they later learnt the advantages of city life, rebuilt Jerusalem on its earlier ruins.

### *Location of Melchizedek's Jerusalem*

This first city of Jerusalem was situated not within the present-day walls of the Old City, but rather on the lower hill extending to the southeast, nowadays called the Ophel<sup>27</sup> or the "City of David". The reason why this location was chosen is partly related to defense, as it is surrounded by steep valleys on three sides: the Central Valley to the west, the Valley of Ben Hinnom to the south and the Kidron Valley to the east, leaving only the northern side open to enemy attack (and even here a shallow depression offers some measure of protection).

By modern standards, Melchizedek's Jerusalem was rather modest, covering at the most an area of 350 x 120 m (the dimensions of the Ophel hill), an area of about nine acres. Compared to other Bronze Age cities, however, this would have been a respectable size; for instance, the mighty northern neighboring city of Shechem covered an area of less than ten acres. The majority of the kingdom's population would have lived in villages surrounding the city, only rushing to the capital for protection in times of war.



**The present-day Ophel hill from the south. This was the site of Melchizedek's Jerusalem, delineated by the Kidron Valley to the east, the Hinnom Valley to the southwest and the taller Temple Mount in the north.**

The number of permanent residents in Melchizedek's Jerusalem is of course hard to determine, since we are dealing with an era that left few written records. An upper limit of 2,500 people has

<sup>25</sup> Literally "copper-stone", the era when mankind learned to smelt copper but still relied heavily on stone tools.

<sup>26</sup> According to Shanks (1995).

<sup>27</sup> From עפל, "to climb".

been suggested on grounds of the dimensions of the city's water supply – the mysterious karstic<sup>28</sup> spring called the Gihon.

### *The Gihon spring*

This unique natural treasure of Jerusalem is situated on the western slope of the Kidron valley. Being the city's sole water supply, as the next closest source (En Rogel) is a hefty three-kilometer walk to the southeast, it is surrounded by an air of mystery because of its unusual properties:

Gihon means gusher or gushing, suggesting something that bursts forth suddenly, intermittently and perhaps mysteriously. This is what the spring did, until recently. Its pulsating flow is caused by the periodic charge and discharge of a natural subterranean siphon, typical of karst terrains.<sup>29</sup>

The spring used to gradually fill up with water and then suddenly spew it out into the valley, probably to the amazement of the dwellers of Jerusalem. In the ancient world, any water spring would be revered as a mystical source of life and a contact point with the numinous – how much more the Gihon with its unique behavior when “the spirit moved upon the waters”!

A unique spring in a unique city ruled by a unique king – Sapir (1992) suggests a connection from the Gihon spring to that special status of Melchizedek as “priest of God Most High”, conferring a singular sanctity upon the holy city endowed with such a treasure. In fact, the Bible does hint at a link between the spring and the kingship of Jerusalem, when the aged King David almost a thousand years later gave specific instructions that his son Solomon should be crowned king at that very site:

So Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, Benaiah son of Jehoiada, the Cherethites, and the Pelethites went down and had Solomon ride on King David's mule, and took him to Gihon. Then Zadok the priest took a horn of oil from the tabernacle and anointed Solomon. And they blew the horn, and all the people said, “Long live King Solomon!” And all the people went up after him; and the people played the flutes and rejoiced with great joy, so that the earth seem to split with their sound.<sup>30</sup>



**Statue of the priest-king Melchizedek, from the cathedral of Chartres**

<sup>28</sup> “Karst is a geological term that describes an irregular region of sinks, caverns and channels caused by groundwater as it seeps and flows through underground rock formations.” – Gill (1994), p. 26.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 27; for a more detailed treatment of the Gihon spring, see pp. 26-27.

<sup>30</sup> The First Book of Kings 2:38-40.

*The outlying regions*

Leaving the city of Jerusalem and widening our perspective to include the surrounding regions, we will now try to explore the borders of Melchizedek's kingdom and its relationship in the greater context of the land of Canaan. The basis for this subchapter is the eminent study of Na'aman (1992), who has tried to reconstruct the politics of Canaan in the Middle Bronze Age.

He paints a picture of a land broken up into small independent city-states, bickering over resources and each trying to extend its influence over its neighbors. He tries to ascertain the importance of the Jerusalemite kingdom among the other small kingdoms of the region, noting that the Book of Joshua presents the Jerusalemite king Adoni-Zedek as the leader among the other Amorite city-states.<sup>31</sup>

The Book of Joshua, however, describes events that took place about 600 years after the period that we are dealing with. Though Na'aman mentions the widely held view that Melchizedek's Jerusalem dominated the entire hill-country of Judea, he is more inclined to believe that it exercised local influence only. The borders of the Jerusalemite kingdom were defined by strong neighboring city-states in all four directions, namely Hebron to the south, Gezer to the west, Shechem to the north and Jericho to the east.

First turning southwards towards the Judean desert, we find a waste land of arid and barren hills where the occasional shepherd sought what pasture he could find for his flock. This uninhabited region formed a natural boundary against the kingdom of Hebron, 30 km to the south, which was an important center but probably weaker than Jerusalem, due to the scarcity of natural resources in the southern hill-country of Judea.

Far more fertile were the lands north and east of Jerusalem that were later to be allotted to the tribe of Benjamin. These were already in the days of Melchizedek densely populated by farmers and herdsmen, the traces of which have been found at 42 different archaeological sites in the region. The area controlled by Jerusalem probably stretched as far east as the Jordan and the Dead Sea (30 km), and presumably also included the city of Jericho, which at that time had only minor importance.

In the north, however, was the far stronger neighbor Shechem, the most important city-state in all the land of Canaan. Jerusalem's influence probably extended only as far the border-city of Bethel (18 km to the north), which is naturally separated from Jerusalem by being highly situated on the southern slopes of Mt Ephraim.

Strong neighbors were found also in the fertile western lands, dotted with villages that sometimes were disputed and claimed by one side or the other. It is impossible to know if such bickering occurred in the time of Melchizedek, but some five hundred years later the Amarna letters record an attempt by the Jerusalemite ruler Abdi-Hepa to wrest a village from the neighboring kingdom of Gezer. The expedition failed miserably, and Abdi-Hepa ended up having to cede one of his own villages to his western neighbor. At any rate, in Melchizedek's time the kingdom extended as far as the villages of Keilah and Aijalon (20 km to the west of Jerusalem).

---

<sup>31</sup> The Book of Joshua 10:1-5.

### *Egyptian invasion*

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the rural settlements of Canaan came under Egyptian influence in the wake of a huge military campaign conducted by that great and ancient kingdom. Archaeologists have uncovered clay tablets called execration texts used in a ritual preparing the soldiers for their gruesome task. The names of some sixty cities, the targets of the expedition, were inscribed on a clay figurine in the likeness of a kneeling prisoner. This effigy was then formally cursed in a voodoo-like ritual and broken to pieces before the eyes of the soldiers, who then went out to war with this image fresh in their minds.

Among the names of important cities found on this clay figurine, such as Byblos and Ashkelon, was found the cryptical name of Rushalimum, the meaning of which has been debated by scholars. Is this the first extra-biblical mention of Jerusalem? Some, such as Na'aman (1992), protest that Jerusalem only later acquired enough importance to warrant such attention (since the main target of the expedition was the prosperous cities of the fertile coastal plain), while others with Shanks (1995) and Murphy-O'Connor (1998) are inclined to attribute "Rushalimum" to an Egyptian corruption of Jerusalem.

In any case, how did Melchizedek's kingdom fare during the Egyptian incursion? Or did it at all occur during his reign? Since neither Abraham nor Melchizedek appear in any extra-biblical records, his reign could be placed anytime during the 20<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The patriarchal account of Genesis does not mention any war, but there is an interesting reference to a great famine during the first days of Abraham in the land of Canaan: "Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land"<sup>32</sup>. Could this famine be related to the Egyptian raid in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century?

### *The city walls*

If this indeed is the case, Melchizedek's reign extended well after the Egyptian incursion, and he might have been the ruler that erected the first city walls of Jerusalem. Such a project represents a huge investment of labor, but is a wise precaution for the protection of the townspeople in a lawless and dangerous era.

A section of the foundations of this first city wall was found in the 1960s by Kathleen Kenyon, who dated it to about 1800 BC, a date close enough to Melchizedek's time for the intriguing identification to be possible. Whether or not the city wall really was built during Melchizedek's reign, it is constructed from large blocks of stone, roughly trimmed, and the angular path of the



**Egyptian clay figurine with  
execration text.**

<sup>32</sup> The Book of Genesis 13:10.

section found indicates that it probably was part of a tower in the city gate opening into the Kidron valley.

The wall runs not in the expected place on the top of hill, which would be a tactically more advantageous position, but rather along lower slope of the Kidron valley. The most probable reason for this choice, presented by Murphy-O'Connor (1998), was that the builder wanted to include the internal entrance to the Gihon spring inside the walls, securing a reliable water supply in times of siege. The existence of this inner entrance, called Warren's shaft after its modern-day discoverer, during the time of Melchizedek is not contested. However, this study follows the conclusion of Gill (1994) who on geological grounds rules that this shaft is part of the original water system of the Gihon.

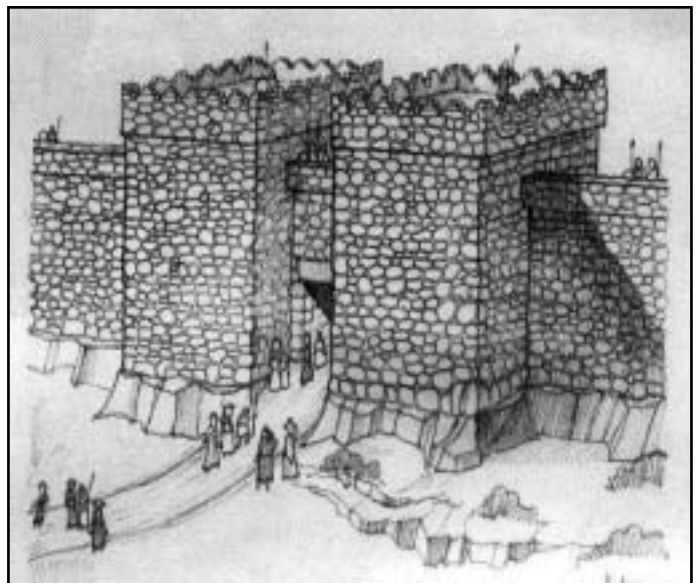


**The foundations of the city wall found by Kathleen Kenyon in the 1960s.**

#### *Summary*

In the course of our investigation, a picture of Melchizedek's kingdom has gradually emerged: an territory of both waste and fertile lands extending a day's march in every direction from the capital, which is a small city of a couple of thousand souls, perched on the low Ophel hill and perhaps encircled by a newly erected city wall. From under this, every now and then a stream of water gushes forth to the wonder of passers-by in the Kidron valley.

Such was the city from which the priest-king Melchizedek extended his scepter over the surrounding regions. Having traced his ancestry and described his kingdom, let us finally consider the outcome of his life and follow the line of his continued influence in the history of the Holy Land.



**Artist's reconstruction of the city gate opening into the Kidron Valley.**

## Melchizedek's Legacy: The Messianic Priesthood

Even though the greater part of his life is shrouded in obscurity, the priest-king of Jerusalem was destined to appear on the stage of history by crossing paths with Abraham, the father of the chosen people and the messianic line. Through this encounter, described in the fourteenth chapter of the book of Genesis, he would have an impact on the ongoing history of the world.

### *The Abrahamite encounter*

The background is a military expedition conducted by an alliance of Mesopotamian kings that ravaged the whole southern region of Canaan. Among the victims were Melchizedek's kinsmen "the Amorites that dwelt in Hazezon Tamar" (Gen 14:7), but his kingdom of Jerusalem seems not to have been part of the target area. As the plunderers, laden with booty and captives, are on their way back to their northern countries, they are ambushed by Abraham who with his 318 men scatters their armies and liberates the captives (mostly people of Sodom). It is at his triumphal return to the hill-country of Judea that the encounter takes place:



**Rubens' majestic rendering of Abraham's meeting with Melchizedek**

And the king of Sodom went out to meet him  
at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley),  
after his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings that were with him.

Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine;  
he was the priest of God Most High.  
And he blessed him and said:  
"Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth;  
And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hands."  
And he gave him a tithe of everything.

Now the king of Sodom said to Abram:  
"Give me the persons, and take the goods for yourself."  
But Abram said to the king of Sodom:  
"I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, that I will take nothing..."  
(Genesis 14:17-23)

The scene is a summit meeting between Abraham (who at the time still bore his old name Abram) and the king of Sodom, who had escaped the invading armies. The meeting takes place in the Valley of Shaveh, a site otherwise unknown that tradition places between Jerusalem and



Bethlehem<sup>33</sup>, and is hosted by Melchizedek as being the spiritual father of the region. The negotiations between the victorious patriarch and the deposed king of Sodom take place under the auspices of an authority they both recognize, perhaps in a way reminiscent of today's United Nations.

The priest-king initiates the meeting by bringing out bread and wine (staples of Amorite diet, as we remember from the account of Sinuhe the Egyptian!) to refresh the weary and battle-worn wanderers<sup>34</sup>, and also to set the right mood for the negotiations to come, since a common meal is the culturally appropriate way of creating a bond of fellowship.<sup>35</sup>

#### *Melchizedek's theology*

The most important thing that comes out the encounter, however, is that Melchizedek places the whole incident in a theological framework and blesses the patriarch in the name of "God Most High", אל עליון. The existence of a high god above the pantheon of lesser deities was generally acknowledged in the land of Canaan<sup>36</sup>, even though the general tendency was to cleave to the lesser deities in these days of polytheism. Melchizedek stands out by his steadfastness to be faithful to "God Most High, Possessor [or Creator, an alternate translation of קונה] of heaven and earth".<sup>37</sup>

This apparently touched the heart of the patriarch Abraham, bearer of God's election. We find him recognizing that Melchizedek was serving the same God that once called him out of his native city of Ur in Mesopotamia, and in his joy of discovering a fellow-believer he acknowledges Melchizedek's priesthood by giving him one-tenth of all that was recovered from the Mesopotamian kings. He publicly announces the identification by joining together the divine name that he had known with the one that Melchizedek was using, forming the compound יהוה אל עליון, "The LORD God Most High".

#### *The continuing legacy*

And the memory of the priest-king Melchizedek, the king of Jerusalem who blessed the patriarch Abraham, would live on throughout the generations of his descendants and surface anew when



**Byzantine rendition of the encounter, supervised from above by the Christ**

<sup>33</sup> According to Horton (1972), p.64, the Valley of Shaveh is identified with the Valley of Beth Karma/Hakkerem in the Genesis Apocryphon 22:14 that was written during the Hellenistic era.

<sup>34</sup> According to the Antiquities of Josephus (chapter 181), where the first-century AD historian expounds upon this meeting, Melchizedek supplied not only the leaders but also Abraham's men with food and drink. It is an almost impossible task to judge whether this information stems from an original tradition handed down in addition to the Biblical account or simply from the very human tendency to embellish a story with imaginative details.

<sup>35</sup> See for instance the treaty between Isaac and Abimelech in Genesis 26:26-31, or the treaty between Jacob and Laban in Genesis 31:44-55.

<sup>36</sup> According to Horton (1976), pp.20-21, the highest deity אל עליון is mentioned in Phoenician sources.

<sup>37</sup> However, Horton (1976), pp. 42-44, interprets Melchizedek's name, which means "king of Zedek" (that is, righteousness), as referring to the deity Zedek who was the personification of Justice and worshipped as such in the lands of Phoenicia, Canaan and southern Arabia.

Jerusalem became the capital of Israel under the skillful reign of king David in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BC. Melchizedek's divine name of אל עליון became one of the many epithets of the God of Israel, with dozens of occurrences in the Psalms, for instance in Psalm 78 that was written by David's worship leader Asaph:

Then they remembered that God was their rock,  
And the Most High God their Redeemer.  
(Psalm 78:35)

But the most famous passage where the legacy of Melchizedek surfaces is in Psalm 110, which may originally have been written to celebrate king David, the victorious defender of Israel and the organizer of its worship to the Most High God. Among descriptions of military victories and kingly majesty appears the cryptic phrase:

The Lord has sworn and will not relent,  
"You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."  
(Psalm 110:4)

However, apart from the famous procession when David brought up the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, clad in the priestly linen ephod and dancing before the Lord with all his might<sup>38</sup>, we find the temporal and spiritual spheres firmly divided during all the days of the First Temple – sometimes co-operating in harmony, sometimes vying for dominion as when the impetuous king Uzziah tried to perform the offerings and was punished with leprosy<sup>39</sup>.

Meanwhile, the words of the prophets gave rise to the hope of a new holy king after the manner of David, anointed to serve the Lord and to shepherd His people. The emerging concept of the coming Messiah, king and priest, was illustrated by the symbolic ceremony that the prophet Zechariah was commanded to perform:

Take the silver and the gold, make an elaborate crown,  
and set it on the head of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest.  
Then speak to him, saying, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts:  
Behold, the Man whose name is the BRANCH!  
From His place He shall branch out,  
And He shall build the temple of the LORD;  
Yes, He shall build the temple of the LORD.  
He shall bear the glory,  
And shall sit and rule on His throne;  
So He shall be a priest on His throne,  
And the counsel of peace shall be between them both.'<sup>40</sup>  
(Zechariah 6:11-13)

When the Maccabee dynasty, descended from the Aaronitic priestly line, came to power through an uprising in the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, messianic hopes were kindled as there was again a priest-king upon the throne of Israel. However, these hopes were soon dashed by Maccabean

<sup>38</sup> For the full story, see the Second Book of Samuel chapter 6, where we see David actually performing the functions of a priest: "And when David had finished offering burnt offerings and peace offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts" (verse 18).

<sup>39</sup> See the Second Book of Chronicles 26:16-21.

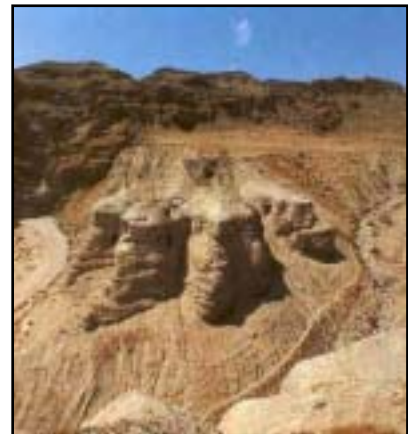
<sup>40</sup> In Jewish tradition, this prophecy is understood as referring to two messianic figures, and therefore they translate the phrase ויהיה כהן as "and *there* will be a priest" instead "and *he* will be a priest".

mismanagement, and many religious people fled the worldly atmosphere of Jerusalem into the Judean desert, where the famous Qumran sect had their monastery.

Here they kept the flame of hope alive, burning with the dream of a coming shepherd for the chosen people. A partly damaged scroll that was found among the Dead Sea Scrolls throws light upon their way of thinking and reveals that not only the glorious king David but also Melchizedek of old was seen as a messianic figure. Excerpts from the scroll, known by the name of 11Qmelchizedek, follow here in the translation and interpretation of Horton (1976):

Its interpretation concerns the end of days as regards “those taken captive”...  
 Melchizedek who will bring them back to them  
 and will “proclaim release” to them to atone for their iniquities...  
 ...to atone in it for all the sons of light and the men of the lot of Melchizedek...  
 ...this is the time of the year of good favor for Melchizedek,  
 and he by his strength will judge the holy ones of El  
 in the interests of a reign of justice...  
 And Melchizedek will exact the vengeance  
 of the judgements of El among men  
 and he will snatch them away from the hand of Belial  
 and from the hand of all the spirits of his lot...

The Qumran community seems to have been waiting for a heavenly figure, whom they called Melchizedek, to appear and free them from the oppression of evil spiritual forces by providing atonement for their sins. He would, in the words of the prophet Isiah, “proclaim liberty to the captives” and “the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God”<sup>41</sup>, thus ushering in the messianic kingdom of justice and peace after defeating the power of the evil one (Belial). From the fragmentary evidence it is not clear if the Qumran community considered this messianic figure to be the actual returning Melchizedek, or if they perhaps just called him by the name of the priest-king whose characteristics he bore, much like the canonical prophets could call the coming Messiah by the name of David<sup>42</sup>.



**The caves of Qumran**

### *The Messiah, priest and king*

And in the year 30 AD, there was a man standing in the synagogue of Nazareth and reading the words of the prophet Isiah referred to above, the passage that begins with “The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor”<sup>43</sup>. Confessed as the king of Israel by his followers<sup>44</sup>, he declared that “My kingdom is not of this world” and “The kingdom of God is within you”<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> Isiah 61:1-2.

<sup>42</sup> See for instance Jeremiah 30:9, and especially Ezekiel 34:23-24: “I will establish one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them – My servant David. He shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David a prince among them” (see also Ezekiel 37:24-25).

<sup>43</sup> Isiah 61:1.

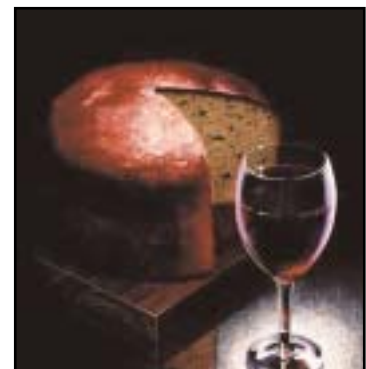
<sup>44</sup> The Gospel of John 1:49, 12:13; see also the Gospel of Matthew 27:37 and 16:16.

<sup>45</sup> See the Gospel of John 18:36 and the Gospel of Luke 17:21.

A most unusual king, he went up to Jerusalem in that famous triumphal procession as described by the prophet Zechariah, “See, your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey”<sup>46</sup>. As the dark clouds of conspiracy were gathering, he explained his kingship with the words that “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many”<sup>47</sup>.

On Passover Eve, he broke bread and took a cup of wine and gave to his disciples, saying, “Take, eat; this is My body” and “Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins”<sup>48</sup>. The next morning saw the cross being raised on the hill of Golgotha, and the events surrounding that fateful weekend have been faithfully remembered by his disciples, who celebrated and still celebrate them as the atoning sacrifice and glorious resurrection of “Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek”<sup>49</sup>.

And so the consummation of the Passover is re-enacted in the Church’s<sup>50</sup> liturgy of the Holy Sacrament<sup>51</sup>, where the messianic Priest-King comes out to meet the weary and battle-worn soul and with pierced hands again and again offers his consecrated bread and wine to strengthen it on its journey. Strife and rivalries are put aside as men gather together under “the king of Salem, meaning ‘king of peace’”<sup>52</sup> and renew their commitment to the New Covenant, looking forward in hope to the dawning of that day when the King will return in glory to proclaim peace to the nations and extend his rule from sea to sea and to the very ends of the earth<sup>53</sup>.



<sup>46</sup> Zechariah 9:9, NIV.

<sup>47</sup> The Gospel of Matthew 20:28.

<sup>48</sup> The Gospel of Matthew 26:26-28.

<sup>49</sup> The Epistle to the Hebrews 6:20.

<sup>50</sup> An interesting detail that deserves mention in connection the messianic Priest-King is that his people is referred to throughout the Bible as “kings and priests” (Revelation 1:6, 5:10), “a kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6) and “a royal priesthood” (First Epistle of Peter 2:9).

<sup>51</sup> The parallel between Melchizedek’s offering and the Holy Communion has been drawn throughout the whole history of the Christian church, beginning with the writings of church fathers such as Ambrose, Cyprian and Clement of Alexandria and growing in importance as time went by. According to Wuttke (1927), “Sermons and hymns repeatedly touch upon the mysterious way in which the person and work of Melchizedek correspond to the most holy Sacrament” (pp. 70-71, author’s translation). During the Middle Ages, Melchizedek was mentioned in the prayer of preparation every time the Holy Communion was celebrated in the Roman Catholic church, serving as a “poetic ornament or a simple pedagogical tool” to illustrate “certain characteristics of the Christ image” (p. 70, author’s translation).

<sup>52</sup> See the Epistle to the Hebrews 6:2, where the name of Melchizedek’s kingdom Salem is connected with the Hebrew word for peace (שלום).

<sup>53</sup> See the prophecy in Zechariah 9:10.

## Summary

Having reached the end of our study, let us pause to consider the picture that has emerged from our research. In the 23<sup>rd</sup> century, Melchizedek's ancestors arrived in the Holy Land as brutal barbarians who eradicated the previous culture. Through northern influence they gradually became more and more civilized and started to settle down in cities. Two signs of their concern for spiritual matters that have remained until today are the menhir monuments that they erected and the huge tombs that they cut out as eternal dwelling for their loved ones.

The Amorites settled mostly on the east side of the Jordan, but also they also crossed over into the hill-country of Judea and rebuilt the city of Jerusalem. In the days of the reign of the priest-king Melchizedek (19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century BC), the city-state kingdom of Jerusalem ruled over the entire region, extending its influence a day's march or 20-30 km in every direction. The barren southern wastes could sustain only the occasional shepherd, but to the east, north and west were fertile and populous lands acknowledging the sovereignty of Jerusalem.

Melchizedek's capital city was situated on the low southeastern Ophel hill and housed a few thousand souls, the sole nearby source of water being the mysterious Gihon spring on the eastern slope of the city. Due to its unique intermittent gushing, it is believed to have carried a special religious significance and conferred a singular status upon the holy city of Jerusalem. The internal access-shaft to the spring was protected by city walls that were constructed sometime around the end of the time of Melchizedek's reign, in the face of growing Egyptian interest in the land of Canaan.

The key point in the life of the priest-king Melchizedek is his encounter with the patriarch Abraham, for which he is forever remembered in the fourteenth chapter of the book of Genesis. As the battle-worn patriarch returns from defeating an army of northern plunderers and liberating their captives, Melchizedek receives him with bread and wine, praising God for the victory and blessing the patriarch in the name of God Most High.



**Bread and wine for the patriarch**

In his joy of discovering a fellow-believer, Abraham acknowledges his priesthood by giving him a tithe from the goods recovered from the northern kings. By joining together the different names that the two of them had used for God, forming the compound "The LORD God Most High", he publicly recognizes Melchizedek as serving the same God. This fact should foster an attitude of humility in worshippers of the God of the Bible when meeting other people and their diverse spiritual experiences.

So great was the Melchizedek's impact upon Abraham that the memory of the priest-king lived on among his descendants and became a symbol associated with the promised Messiah, surfacing in the Psalms of David and the writings of the Qumran sect. Finally the rivers of prophecy and inspiration converged with the advent of Jesus Christ, the Servant King anointed to bring the supreme sacrifice to atone for the sins of the world. And ever since, through the Church celebrating his work in the liturgy of Holy Communion, the true Priest-King offers his consecrated bread and wine to everyone who would enter his holy kingdom.

## Bibliography

Anati, Emmanuel, Palestine Before the Hebrews. London: Jonathan Cape (1962).

Eidsvaag, Gunnar Magnus, Oppgave i hebraisk mellomfag. Oslo: Institute for East European and Middle East studies, University of Oslo (2003).

Gill, Dan, "How They Met". In: BAR, vol. 20:4, July/August (1994), pp. 21-33.

Gonen, Rivka, "Urban Canaan in the Late Bronze Period". In: Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, 253 (1984), pp. 61-73.

Hayward, Robert, "Shem, Melchizedek, and Concern with Christianity in the Pentateuchal Targum". In: Cathcart, Kevin J (ed), Targumic and Cognate Studies. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press (1996).

Horton, Fred, The Melchizedek Tradition. Cambridge: University Printing House (1976).

Kenyon, Kathleen, Amorites and Canaanites. London: Oxford University Press (1963).

Keyes, Nelson Beecher, Bibelns länder och folk. Stockholm: Reader's Digest aktiebolag (1959).

Mazar, Benjamin, "Jerusalem in Biblical Times". In: Levine, Lee I. (ed), The Jerusalem Cathedra, Jerusalem (1982), pp 1-24.

Murphy-O'Connor, Jerome, The Holy Land. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1998).

Na'aman, Nadav, "Canaanite Jerusalem and its Central Hill Country Neighbours in the Second Millennium B.C.E.". In: Ugarit-Forschungen, 24 (1992), pp. 275-291.

Pearson, Birger A., "Melchizedek in Early Judaism, Christianity and Gnosticism". In: Stone, Michael (ed), Biblical Figures Outside the Bible. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International (1998).

ספיר, שאול, "מעין הגיחון – משמעות וייחוד", לע"פ, 2 קשון סלו תשנ"ח, עמ' 18-19.

Shanks, H, Jerusalem: An Archaeological Biography. New York: Random House (1995).

Wuttke, G, Melchisedech, der Priesterkönig von Salem. Giessen: Verlag von Alfred Töpenmann in Giessen (1927).

The Holy Bible, New King James Version. Thomas Nelson, n. p. (1982).

The Holy Bible, New International Version. Colorado Springs: International Bible Society (1984).

The Thompson Chain-Reference Bible, New International Version. The B. B. Kirkbride Bible Company, n. p. (1983).