



# MINUTES WITH MESSIAH

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## AND IT WAS WINTER

It was Hanukkah and it was winter. The rabbi wandered in Solomon's Porch. This was a colonnaded portico on the eastern wall of the Temple complex, opposite the Western Wall, which within fifty years would be all that remained of the pride of King Herod. It was not unusual for people to wander through these porches; many a rabbi regularly taught his disciples there.

It was Hanukkah and it was winter. Inside the porticos, in a corner of the eastern courtyard stood a pile of rubble. It was not part of the construction yard for the building operation that had been going on almost fifty years, and which would continue for over thirty years more. It was not the trash pile for the masons and carvers, although it consisted of a pile of stones. It was more significant than that. This pile of rubble had once been part of the Temple itself. In fact, it had been the altar. It now lay in ruins because it had been replaced. Antiochus IV Epiphanes had defiled this altar by sacrificing swine on it. When the Temple was rededicated the old altar was torn down. Because it had been the altar, though, nobody knew just what to do with the stones. So they piled them here "until Messiah will come and tell us what to do with them."

It was Hanukkah and it was winter. This was the time of the feast commemorating the rededication of the Temple. It was an anniversary of that pile of rubble being placed there. And the rabbi was walking near that place. This was the one some said was Messiah. And now he could be found near the stones that awaited the coming of Messiah.

It was Hanukkah and it was winter. Naturally some people were thinking of the meaning of the stones. Naturally, when someone saw the rabbi walking there he gathered a group of people and went to ask the rabbi a question. "Are we going to have to keep waiting for Messiah, or are you going to tell us clearly that you are he? If you are Messiah, what shall we do with this pile of rocks?"

It was Hanukkah and it was winter. The rabbi paused, and then answered. "I have told you already,

but you didn't listen. I showed you by signs, and you did not see. You don't want to listen because you don't want to hear the truth. I and the Father are one."

It was Hanukkah and it was winter. Somebody in the crowd said, "Now we know what to do with these rocks. Use them to stone this blasphemer." Many joined him in taking up the very rocks they had been asking about. When the rabbi asked for which of his good works they stoned him they replied, "It is not for your good works, but because you applied the *Sh'ma* to yourself." [The *Sh'ma* reads: *Sh'ma Yisroel, Adonoi eloheinu, Adonoi echad*; Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.]

It was Hanukkah and it was winter. The rabbi answered, "You don't even know your own scriptures. But if you won't listen to them, at least pay attention to what I do." Then he escaped from them.

It was Hanukkah and it was winter. It was forty years later. The rabbi had been executed on a cross. He had come out of the grave and returned to his Father. People no longer asked what to do with the pile of stones because they were now part of a larger pile. They had not been used to stone the Messiah. They had seen the Messiah and nobody needed to worry about them any more, because the Temple was gone. It was Hanukkah and it was winter. And God now dwelt in the hearts of His people and not in a house made by a tyrannical half-breed Jewish king.

*(Based on John 10:22-39)*

(Hanukkah begins November 30, 2002)

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# KING OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

His name is the King of Righteousness. He is also called the King of Peace. Who was this mysterious man who met Abraham on his return from rescuing Lot after the battle of the nine kings? Nobody knows. Some say he was Shem, son of Noah, but that is speculation. (Using the genealogy of Genesis 11, this would have been approximately 160 years before Shem's death.) All Genesis 14 says is that he was a priest of the most high God. Of course, that is all anyone really needs to know, but people have continued to want to know more.

I won't pretend to know any more about Melchizedek than the scriptures tell us. The writer of Hebrews, however tells us more about him than previously known. I will make one observation of my own, and then look at what that writer had to say about Melchizedek and Jesus.

## King of Giving

This man's name is interesting. The true Hebrew form would be *Melech ha Tzedekh*, King of Righteousness. The *Tzedekh* portion of his name also appears in that of the prophet Zedekiah (Righteousness of God). One of the basic *mitzvot* (commands) observed by Jewish people today is *tzedekah*, which is generally interpreted as "giving." Among the Orthodox it is not unusual to be called upon frequently by what amounts to professional beggars (call them "fund raisers" if you will; the Yiddish word is *shnorrer*) giving people and companies the opportunity to fulfill this *mitzvah*. Thus

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"righteousness" and "giving" are equated. Using this interpretation, Melchizedek should have been the king of givers. The scripture says he gave bread and wine (Gen 14:18), but he is most famous for receiving. He gave a little, but received a tenth of the spoils from the battle. While it may be "more blessed to give than to receive," apparently when you receive in God's name it is attributed as righteousness.

The writer of Hebrews compares Jesus and Melchizedek. While he barely mentions the man's name/title, there may be a comparison here that he

didn't make, based on the modern view of *tzedekah* as giving. Using this interpretation, Jesus as compared with Melchizedek may truly be called the King of Giving. He gives rest (Matt 11:28), power (Lk 10:19), wisdom (Lk 21:15), living water (Jn 4:14), eternal life (Jn 10:28), a new commandment (Jn 13:34), and peace (Jn 14:27). All these things, however, don't make Jesus the king of giving. He earns that title from another promise. "And the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." (Jn 6:51) Paul described his ultimate gift in Philippians 2: 5-8:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Jesus combines in himself the meanings of "righteousness" and "giving" inherent in the name of Melchizedek. "Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matt 20:28) "But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom." (Heb 1:8)

Hebrews 7 is one big parenthesis in the writer's discussion of the better covenant. It may be a sideline, but it is an important one. In it he makes three main points to prove that Jesus is a better priest.

## Receiving the tithe

The writer's first point may seem unusual to modern Americans. What difference does it make who gave the tithe to whom and who blessed whom? In the passage in Genesis it is even unclear who gave and who received the tithe. Using English grammar rules one might even assume that Melchizedek was the giver rather than the receiver. Yet the writer of Hebrews makes it a major tenet that Abraham gave the tithe, and therefore Melchizedek was greater than Levi, who eventually sprang from Abraham.

Maybe we can understand better if we look at the tithe in terms of taxation. We pay taxes to the government because we are "under" their rule. The government doesn't pay taxes to us, although we may feel that they work for us. None of us is above the law.

If our government paid taxes to England we would wonder why we weren't still under England's rule. So it is important to the writer's point of view that Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek.

He goes further, however. He claims that Levi, being yet three generations away, in effect paid the tithes. This is important. Melchizedek was greater than Abraham. The One who was to be a Melchizedekian priest is greater than Levi because Abraham was below Melchizedek. Therefore, Jesus is greater than Levi. Thus Jesus is the priest of a better covenant and even Abraham recognized it as such.

To the Jewish believers in Jesus the Messiah this would be of vital importance. It would become more so in a matter of a few years. The Temple would be destroyed. Jews would be scattered throughout the world and access to genealogical records would virtually disappear. It would become difficult to identify who was a priest, but it wouldn't matter because there was a higher priest whose superiority was established before the Law of Moses.

## The oath

The next point is even more telling. The author says that there was a change of covenant—a modification of the contract. Was the law bad? By no means! But it was imperfect. Because it was imperfect, God required a more perfect priesthood.

Jesus could not have come from the tribe of Levi and been the Messiah. Other than certain passages that specify the tribe from which Messiah would spring, if he were of the Levitical tribe he would, of necessity, be part of the old priesthood. It was important that he come from another tribe, specifically Judah. Otherwise there could be no change to a better priesthood.

Of greater importance in the change of covenant is that the change was made with an oath. When was this oath administered? It can be found in Psalm 110:4. Even while the Levitical priesthood was in full flower, God made an eternal oath saying, "you are a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." While the tithe preceded the Levitical priesthood, the oath of a changed covenant came afterward. The timing is important. A new will supercedes any previous statement of the maker. If the oath had been made in Abraham's time, the Law would have abrogated the oath. Since it was made after the covenant it takes precedence.

Beyond that, the writer points out that the Levites were priest without having been confirmed by an oath. A modern American equivalent might be found in the succession to the Presidency. When John Kennedy died, we didn't have a President for a short period of time. Lyndon Johnson acted as President, but

until he was administered the oath of office we were without a President. The Levitical priesthood, because it was established without an oath, was in essence an interim priesthood. It lasted longer than a few hours, but it retained its status as temporary because the oath was not administered until the new priest, after the order of Melchizedek, was ready.

## An unchangeable priesthood

In a related point, the author points out that the priesthood after the order of Melchizedek was a better priesthood because it would not change. He had just made the point that there was a change in the priesthood, but now he says that the new priesthood can

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never change. In part this is due to the oath. More importantly, it is due to the nature of the one holding the office.

We marvel that Queen Elizabeth II may soon have been monarch of England longer than either King George III or Queen Victoria. Over fifty years with one monarch. Amazing! But there will be another ruler in England soon. She can't live forever. And when she does die, there is a possibility that the monarchy in England will die with her. The advantage of our priest over the Levites is that he can and does live forever! There can be no change in the priesthood because the priest remains eternally.

It is comforting to know that we have an eternal priest. When the children of Jacob went to Egypt they were in good shape. Then we read in Exodus 1:8 that a new king arose, "who knew not Joseph." Then is when their fortunes went downhill. But we don't need to worry about a new priest who does not know us. Our priest is eternal, and he knows us because he was one of us.

Jesus is a priest forever "after the order of Melchizedek." While we may not know much about the first King of Righteousness, we know about the current one. He has given his own flesh for us, yet lives eternally. He was recognized as superior even before the establishment of the Levitical priesthood. His priesthood was established by an oath of God, who can not lie. We know all we need to know about Melchizedek because we see all we need to know in his heir.

# NOT IN “IT”

“And they shall make a Temple, that I may dwell among them.” (Exodus 25:8)

What was the purpose of the Temple? Many would say that it was built as a dwelling place for God. But that is not what the scripture says.

Admittedly, the Temple was where the *shekinah*, the glory of God, was revealed to the people. It was where the priest made their daily contact with God through sacrifices. It is true that Solomon, in 1 Kings 8:13 called it a place for God to dwell in, “a settled place for Thee to abide in forever.” But Solomon was wrong, and not just about the “forever” part. If he built the Temple as a place for God to dwell in, he built it for the wrong reason; he didn’t build it for God’s reason.

The passage from Exodus quoted above reads strangely. One would think God would say, “make a Temple, that I may dwell *in it*.” That isn’t what He said. He said, “Make a Temple, that I may dwell *among them*.” What does this mean?

Paul recognized that God is bigger than any building. He told the Athenians, “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands.” (Acts 17:24) Not in their temples; not even in the Temple of the Jews. So what, then was the purpose of the Temple, if not as a dwelling place for God?

Exodus 25 says God would dwell among Israel if they would build him a Temple. The purpose of the Temple was not that God could dwell in it, but that He could dwell in them. We hear people saying, “Let Jesus

come into your heart.” That is exactly what God wanted to do in Israel. Before he could come into their hearts, though, they had to build a tabernacle, and later a temple. God doesn’t want mere acknowledgement; He wants us to prove our faith. The people of Israel had to give excessively in order to build the tabernacle and the Temple. They did so willingly, and because of this God knew he could dwell among them.

God does not ask us to build him a Temple of cedar and gold. He is not interested in our church buildings. We are His temple (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16). But we still have to give up something so that God can know that we are willing to let Him dwell among us. Israel gave up valuable things to build the Temple. Shortly thereafter, they left God again, and began sacrificing to idols. Maybe that is because they just gave up *things*. They didn’t give themselves. And when Herod the Great rebuilt the Temple, the *shekinah* never appeared there, except in the bodily form of Jesus, because the people as a whole had given up on God.

So, if God doesn’t want our church buildings or our money, what does he want? We fall into the trap of thinking that things represent us. We give toys to our children and tell them to go play in their rooms while we do our own activities. We give our money to the church, and ignore the lost. We build buildings, and they remain empty five or six days out of the week. It wasn’t the Temple God wanted; it was the hearts of Israel. God doesn’t want our things; God wants us.

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God.” (Rom 12:1)

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