THE SACRIFICE OF MELCHISEDECH

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BRIEF indeed is the original documentary evidence for the existence of Melchisedech, priest and king of Salem. Three verses of Genesis (14, 18-20) picture him succinctly and then allow him to pass quietly out of the life-story of Abraham.

But this dignitary, though he ruled a tiny state, and must have been very insignificant in comparison to other rulers of his time, has been from his day to our own a subject of interest; first to the Hebrews,[1] then, after the famous comparison between Christ and Melchisedech in the Epistle to the Hebrews,[2] to the Christians. Among the Christians themselves, he has been a center of controversy. The early Trinitarian heretics and Gnostics chose him as a figure around which to weave error and speculation. The Reformation period found him the object of countless treatises in connection with the question of sacrifice. Criticism relegated him to mythology, but seems today ready to treat him less unkindly.[3] Since Paul, at least, we find him a constant topic of exegetical interest.

Of the many questions that arise in the study of Genesis 14 we are going to limit ourselves to one: Was there a sacrifice on the occasion of the meeting of Abraham and Melchisedech? A strictly literal translation of the passage runs as follows:

> 18. And Melchisedech, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine; and he was a priest of the most high God (El Elyon);
> 19. And he blessed him and said: Blessed be Abraham by the most high God, creator of heaven and earth,
> 20. And blessed be the most high God who delivered your foes into your hand. And he gave him tithes of all.

Is there a question of sacrifice in this text? We shall try to answer that question by an examination of the text and context.

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[1] Ps. 109 (T.M. 110), 4.   [2] Esp. chap. 7.
[3] Most commentators, even non-Catholics, now admit at least the "great antiquity" of this passage. Cf. H. Gunkel, Genesis 3 (1910), p. 286; O. Procksch, Die Genesis (1924), p. 512.

Now Catholic exegetes at one time held that the idea of sacrifice was expressed in the verb הוֹצִיא, which is translated by the LXX ἐξήνεγκεν, by Jerome, "proferens," which we translated above "brought out." This opinion is today practically abandoned.[4] As Ed. Busse points out,[5] the favorite text used in proving that this Hiphil means 'to sacrifice' is found in Judges 6, 18-19. Gideon talking to the angel of the Lord says: "Do not go away from here, I beg you, until I return and bring forth my offering" וְהֹצֵאתִי אֶת־מִנְחָתִי. Then in the next verse Gideon prepares a kid, cakes, and broth, and he "brought them forth (וַיּוֹצֵא) to him." He then lays them on a rock at the bidding of an angel, and they are consumed by fire. If there is a sacrifice here,[6] it would be difficult to prove that fact from the Hiphil form alone. For the ordinary meaning of this form of the verb is "to cause to come forth," "to lead forth." Frequently "God caused Israel to come out of Egypt".[7] Or occasionally it means "to cause to come upon."[8] I think that Arendzen's attempt[9] to derive a sacrificial meaning from the verb is not conclusive, as G. Brinkworth notes.[10] It is not even certain that the use of "my offering" (with *minha*), is to be taken as sacrificial.[11] Hence it would seem far-fetched to try to found an argument for the sacrifice of Melchisedech on the mere verb-form, even in combination with the offering. Still it is worth noting that Buchanan-Gray[12] sees what we may call a sacrificial "coloring" in some uses of the causative of verbs of "going." Taken alone, therefore, "he brought bread and wine" is neutral. Does the context hint at sacrifice?

[4]J. P. Arendzen defends this opinion in his article *"Melchisedek,"* The *Irish Ecclesiastical Record,* 27 (1926), pp. 115-117.

[5]*Der Wein im Kult des A. T.,* Freiburg, Theol. Stud., 29 (1922, p. 37.

[6]A. Vaccari, "Melchisedech," etc. *Verbum Domini,* 18 (1938), p. 209; and P. F. Cremin, "Melchisedech," etc., in *Irish Eccl. Record,* 51 (1938), p. 475, hold against a sacrifice.

[7]Ex 12, 51; 13, 3 and passim. Cf. P. F. Cremin, art. cit., p. 474.

[8]Deut. 22, 14.

[9]Loc. cit.

[10]*"Melchisedech,"* King of Salem, *Clergy Review,* 10 (1935), 354, n. 16. Cf. also Cremin, loc. cit.

[11]Cf. reasons against *sacrificial* offering given by Vaccari and Cremin in articles already cited.

[12]Sacrifice in the O. T., Oxford (1925), p. 28.

Immediately after the statement of the bringing forth bread
and wine we have the clause, "and he was a priest."

F. J. Jerome says of this clause: "It is interesting to see how
some try to twist the meaning of 'for' in the Hebrew, which is
decisive for the sacrificial nature of the text."[13]   Though "de-
cisive" is perhaps too strong a word, some Catholics do not give
sufficient consideration to the expression.

Two modern non-Catholic exegetes treat of the expression,
and while they do not refer to the Vulgate's "erat *enim*" they
conclude against it.   Jacob says[14] that the clause is circumstan-
tial and is the foundation for what *follows*.   König says[15] it is a
circumstantial adversative, referring to or modifying what *fol-
lows*.   Jacob is a Jew and König a Protestant.   But even Hum-
melauer and Heinisch,[16] while allowing some basis for the
translation *"erat enim,"* note that other translations have *"et
ipse erat,"* and say that the Septuagint with "ἦν δὲ" is against
the Vulgate, since the Greek particle is an adversative.

Jacob gives a list of texts to justify his joining וְהוּא כֹהֵן
to what follows.   Let us examine the texts.

Gen. 14, 10: "And the valley of Siddim was full of slime-
pits, and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled and fell there"
(or "into them").   Now first of all it is to be noted that this
clause has a noun subject and not a pronoun subject.   And
clauses with noun subjects are frequently to be joined syntac-
tically with what follows.   This is very much less frequently
the case with pronominal clauses.   Still I think the connection
in the text is not conclusive in Jacob's favor.   For in v. 8
we read: "The kings (of the Pentapolis) went out and joined
battle *with them* in the valley of Siddim."   Verse 9 is a paren-
thesis explaining "them."   Verse 10 *might* be translated "which
valley of Siddim" etc. without violence to sense or to syntax.

Gen. 14, 12: "And they took Lot . . . and they went away,

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[13]F. J. Jerome, *Das Geschichtliche Melchisedech Bild und Seine Bedeutung im Hebräer-
brief* (1917), p. 66.
[14]B. Jacob, Das Erste Buch der Tora (1934), p. 379.
[15]E. König, Die Genesis³ (1925), p. 475.
[16]Fr. de Hummelauer, In Genesim (1908), p. 383; P. Heinisch, Das Buch Genesis
(1930), p. 222.

and he was dwelling וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב in Sodom." Here quite clearly
the pronoun refers *back* to Lot. The Kings who took away the
inhabitants of Sodom took away Lot *"because* he lived in
Sodom." The Vulgate has "qui habitabat"; the LXX:
ἦν γὰρ κατοικῶν, using an explanatory particle.

Gen. 14, 13 has two clauses of a similar nature to which Jacob
refers. וְהוּא שֹׁכֵן is translated rightly in the Vulgate: "qui
habitabat"; explicative, therefore, of the preceding. The clause
וְהֵם בַּעֲלֵי בְרִית is translated rightly by the Vulgate: "hi *enim*
pepigerant foedus cum Abram."

A similar examination of the clauses in Gen. 12, 6 and 13, 7
would show that Jacob does not establish his case by the exam-
ples he quotes. His last example (Gen. 37, 7) is not exactly
parallel, being introduced by "And behold."

König, also, takes note of the syntax of the clause in the verse
in our discussion, and says that it is adversative, and explains
what follows (the blessing of Abraham). He translates the
verse as follows: "Und Melkisedeq, der König von Salem,
brachte Brot und Wein heraus, während er *doch* ein Priester."

For this type of circumstantial clause explaining the follow-
ing clause König refers to his own grammar.[17] Here he cites
many examples of circumstantial clauses, but there is only one
example which would at all justify his translation of our clause
in a sense so strongly adversative and disjunctive. The example
is the clause beginning וַאֲנִי in Psalm 72, 23a (73 in T. M.),
where he translates "und ich" i. e. "Während ich *doch.*"

This example is taken from the Psalms, hence from poetry,
and may be objected to as a foundation for a rule of the sober
construction of narrative style. Secondly, the particular pas-
sage in which it is found is made up of a series of clauses, which
would admit of several translations. However, most translators
take the clause in the adversative sense.[18] The Vulgate has:

"Ut jumentum factus sum apud te, et ego semper tecum."

The "et" does not give any light one way or another. The

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[17]Historisch-Komparative Syntax der Hebr. Sprache (1897), #362q.
[18]Cf. e.g., A. Vaccari, Il *Libro di Giobbe e I Salmi* (1927), p. 145; "Ma io starò sempre con Te."

Revised Version has "Nevertheless." The LXX has "and I" at the beginning of a new sentence, exactly as in the Vulgate.

But Fr. Baethgen[19] takes the whole passage thus:

"Als mein Herz erbittert war, und Schmerz mir durch die Nieren schnitt,
Da war ich ein Tier ohne Verstand, war dir gegenüber ein Vieh.
Denn ich bin beständig bei dir. . . . " (For I am ever near Thee.)

And to one comparing the translation with the Hebrew it makes good sense and violates no rule of syntax. Neither König nor Jacob, therefore, establish their translations by really parallel examples. We may note also that König in Genesis 14, 13b translates the same Hebrew construction by "während er . . ." (since) and not "während er *doch*" (*but* since . . .). What is the reason for such a change in syntax in five verses?

But let us examine the case apart from the text.[20]

The copula followed immediately by a noun or pronoun, instead of by a verb, is used in Hebrew to interrupt the ordinary flow of a narrative, or a *succession* of ideas. Such an interruption of time sequence or logical sequence is practically always present when anything but the verb follows the copula. This interruption or break may occur, because the narrative is to take a completely *new turn,* as in the beginning of Gen. 16; this is not the case in our text. Or it may be because a new *subject* is being introduced; again this is not the case in our text. Or, finally, to give some circumstance that explains, but does not *succeed* in time or thought the *preceding* clause. Pronominal clauses, as distinct from nominal clauses, belong *usually* to this last group. Now there are cases where such clauses may refer to what *follows*. Hence there is question, i) whether we should be justified in laying down a rule to the effect that pronominal clauses of the type: copula—pronoun—substantive (or adjective) modify what *precedes*. If so, we ought to class as exceptions the cases where such clauses refer to what *follows*, or ii) whether we should refrain from rigid rules and say merely that ordinarily such clauses modify what *precedes*.

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[19]Psalmen³ (1904), in loc.
[20]The basis of my discussion is S. Driver's *"Hebrew Tenses"*³ (1892), pp. 195-211.

Using Driver as a point of departure I have collected examples of the use of these clauses, restricting myself to Genesis, and to strictly parallel constructions. I am also setting down the Septuagint translation, because many of the examples will show that Hummelauer and Heinisch (among others) are incorrect when they say that the Septuagint took the clause in Gen. 14, 18 to refer to the following because of its use of an adversative Greek particle. The lexica and the grammars go against such statements. Thus the "Thesaurus Linguae Graecae"[21] and Liddel-Scott[22] tell us that the particle δέ sometimes subjoins a clause in such a manner that it may be replaced by " γάρ " This is, of course, for classical Greek. Thayer [23] attests a similar usage in the N. T.; the particle introduces explanations and separates them from the things to be explained. In intercalated explanations, the two particles came to be confounded, and were equivalent in usage. Some of our examples show this rule holds for the Greek of Genesis.

Gen. 15, 2: "And Abraham said, Lord God, what will you give me, *seeing I go* וְאָנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ childless. The Greek, " ἐγὼ δὲ ἀπολύομαι ."

Here the Hebrew clause is certainly explicative referring to the preceding, and the Greek particle is not adversative.

Gen. 18, 1: And the Lord appeared to Abraham in the vale of Mambre, *as he was sitting* וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב in the door of his tent. The Greek has καθημένου αὐτοῦ.

Gen. 18, 8: "He took the butter and milk and the calf which he had boiled, and set them before them, *standing by them* וְהוּא עֹמֵד as they ate. The Greek has: αὐτὸς δὲ παριστήκει Here the clause *may* in sense refer to what follows. But the translation may also follow the lines: "Standing by them he served them the butter, etc., and they ate." It is hardly a conclusive case one way or another.

[21]Vol. 2 (B-D), Col. 927.   [22]A Greek-English Lexicon[8] (1901), p. 329, s.v. no. 4,
[22]A Greek-English Lexicon[8] (1901), p. 329, s.v. no. 4.
[23]A Greek-English Lexicon of the N.T. (1888), p. 125, s.v. no. 6.

Gen. 18, 10: "And Sarah heard in the tent door *which was behind him*" וְהִוא אַחֲרָיו. The Greek: οὖσα ὄπισθεν αὐτοῦ. Again the clause modifies the preceding.

Gen. 18, 27: I will speak to my Lord although I am but dust and ashes וְאָנֹכִי עָפָר וָאֵפֶר. The Greek: "ἐγὼ δέ εἰμι γῆ κτλ." Again clearly a clause modifying the preceding. The sense of the clause is *concessive* and the Greek particle is to that extent adversative, but certainly not adversative-*disjunctive*.

Gen. 20, 3: "Behold you are a dead man, because of the woman whom you have taken, *for she is a man's wife.*" (.... בְּעֻלַת בַּ וְהִוא). The Greek: "αὕτη δέ ἐστιν". Again we have a clause explicative of the preceding statement, and again note the Septuagint use of the particle."

Gen. 25, 29: And Jacob cooked pottage and Esau came *faint* from the field; i. e., Esau came *and he was faint* (וְהוּא עָיֵף The Greek: ἦλθεν δὲ ʼΗσαυ ... ἐκλείπων. The clause in question modifies the preceding; the LXX participle is accurate.

Not to consume too much space, the reader is referred to similar examples in Gen. 32, 32; 37, 2; 42, 38; 48, 14, as they lie in the Hebrew and LXX texts. In Gen. 38, 5, Kittel's emendation is probably suggested by the LXX. Apart from these examples there is one which I think is questionable in Gen. 34, 30. It would seem to be better to take the phrase ..... וַאֲנִי מְתֵי מ as referring to what follows; thus: Jacob said " . . . You have troubled me and made me hateful to the . . . inhabitants of this land. Since *I am small in number* they will . . . kill me." But the translation: "You have made me hateful to the . . . inhabitants of this land, *despite the fact that I am small in number* (i. e. weaker than they and at their mercy), and they will now kill me," is possible.

According to the ordinary syntax, therefore, the translation of the clause וְהוּא כֹהֵן in Gen. 14, 18 would be: "And Melchisedech, the king of Salem, brought out bread and wine, for (explicative) [24] he was a priest of the most high God, and he

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[24] P. F. Cremin (l. c. p. 475), points out that the Masoretic reading in 14, 18 favors this syntax.

blessed, etc." But in view of the fact that syntax is not finally conclusive, we ask if offering and priesthood are joined.

Procksch[25] says the hungry *refugee* was met with food and drink. He gives Isaias 21, 14 as an example. Heinisch, quoting Dt. 29, 5s, also takes this view,[26] as do Vaccari[27] and Busse.[28] To those who hold that the bread and wine must have been for some other use than mere refreshment,[29] since Abraham clearly had food with him, Heinisch[30] answers with a question: "Is it usual to give a traveller or a friend refreshment only when he has not a piece of bread left?"

The question then arises: If the priesthood is not introduced to explain the bringing forth of bread and wine, what does it explain? The common non-Catholic view is that the priesthood explains the blessing that follows. To which it may be answered that *anyone* could bless in those early times; the blessing was not a distinctly nor an exclusively priestly act. And Jacob's remark[31] that the blessing was part of the office of the priest according to Dt. 10, 8; 18, 5-7; 21, 5, is not quite apposite. For that law was written down centuries after our event for priests; it did not apply to a Chanaanite king.

Father Vaccari's recent suggestion[32] that the title "priest of El Elyon" is introduced to explain or prepare for the blessing in the name of El Elyon, since this name was unusual for the Hebrews, has more force. But neither is it final. Why introduce the *priesthood?* To prepare for the unusual name the author could have said, "And he was a 'worshipper' (or some such epithet) of El Elyon." Besides there is evidence that, though the Hebrews used this name but infrequently, it was not so strange a name to them; recall the god Elion of the Phoenicians and Aliyon (or Aleyon) of Ras Shamra.

So without excluding the possibility of the other interpretations, it seems preferable to accept the clause as explaining the

[25]Op. cit. p. 513.   [26]l. c.
[27]art. cit., Verbum Domini, 18 (1938), p. 211ff.
[28]Der Wein im Kult des A. T., pp. 37-41.
[29]For example, B. Jacob, op. cit. p. 379.
[30]l. c.   [31]l. c.   [32]art. cit. p. 210 s.

bringing forth of bread and wine, if we can find (apart from the syntax which favors it) a reason for such a connection.

Jacob, though he takes our clause to refer to what follows, says: "The bringing forth of bread and wine is a priestly act."[33] The scene puts before us a "festliches Mahl," a sort of forerunner of the later Jewish Kiddush.

And indeed, many modern commentators see something ritualistic in the act of Melchisedech. The whole context viewed in the light of ancient customs favors such an interpretation. The characters, Melchisedech, the king of Salem, Abraham and his allies, the solemn invocations of El Elyon, the giving of tithes, the disposal of the booty, all indicate that this meeting was a solemn council, and even concerned a sort of pact between the princes. And we know that in those days (as later), such councils and pacts were sealed by a sacrifice.[34] Blome[35] cites Wellhausen, "Reste Arabischen Heidentums," p. 121, as giving the reason for this. He says that all agreements were sealed by a banquet in which some idea of sacrifice entered, since God was considered a third party to the contract, and "Essengemeinschaft ist sakrale Gemeinschaft." There is a passage in the Tel El Amarna Tablets[36] where a subject prince is considered traitorous for partaking of such a banquet with the enemy of the Egyptian king. Busse asserts[37] that the scene in Gen. 14, 18 is a sort of sacred meal, not precisely a sacrifice, but the distinction between the two is not too clear in the text.

If we recall also that Abraham was returning from a victory, and that victory sacrifices or sacrifice banquets were a custom of ancient East, we would naturally expect a ritual meal here. Recently discovered sculptures of the Hittite period[38] show two persons sitting at a table with bread and a chalice. Sometimes the representation sets forth the blessing of the chalice; some-

[33]l. c.
[34]Cf. Gen. 15, 26, 30; 31, 54; Jos. 9, 14.
[35]F. Blome, Die Opfermaterie in Babylonien und Israel (1934), p. 359.
[36]Cf. J. A. Knudtzon, Die el Amarna-Tafeln, Leipzig (1915), Vol. 1, Ep. 162, 1. 23; p. 654.
[37]l. c.
[38]Cf. E. Burrows, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (1925), 277 s. and A. H. Sayce, in The Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archeology (1906), p. 94ff.

times one of the persons is a divinity represented by a priest, and the other is a warrior going to war or returning. This is only a faint light, it is true, but when we realize that the Chanaanites had the practice of a banquet sacrifice,[39] it seems safe to say that Melchisedech, priest and king, presided at such a rite on this occasion. The Encyclopedia Biblica in the article, "Sacrifice,"[40] says that such a practice was common in early times, and even cites Gen. 14, 18 as an example. Robertson Smith favors[41] this view that victory sacrifices were common.

There is one other element in the passage that might lead us to the conclusion that Melchisedech performed a sacrificial rite. The giving of tithes *might* be an indication of a distinctly priestly act. This idea is found nowhere sufficiently developed to form a conclusive indication. But since the tithes have generally a religious signification and are connected with sacrifice at least indirectly it would be interesting to examine the question further if space allowed. Our conclusion, therefore, is that the bringing forth of bread and wine was for refreshment, but not exclusively so. There was a sacrificial element also. And Melchisedech's priesthood is introduced to explain why *he* presided at this solemn gathering.

It would be interesting, also, to trace further the tradition of Melchisedech in Old Testament and in New Testament times. But that has been ably done elsewhere,[42] and my desire has been to see what the text and context themselves give us in the light of philology, syntax, and the history of the times. And I think it is fair to conclude that Jerome did not go against any of these, when he put down his translation (with all that it implies), "Erat *enim* sacerdos Dei altissimi."

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[39]Cf. M-J Lagrange, *Etudes sur les Religions Sémitiques* (1905), p. 237ff.
[40]Vol. (O-Z), Col. 4194.
[41]*The Religion of the Semites*[3] (1927), p. 403, n. 2.
[42]The three most recent discussions are: A. Vaccari, Verbum Domini, 18 (1938), pp. 208-214. P. F. Cremin, The Irish Ecclesiastical Record, 51 (1938), pp. 469-487; 52 (1938), pp. 37-45. W. J. McGarry, S.J., "Paul and the Crucified" (1939), pp. 132-161.