



Reviews of the Enoch Seminar 2014.04.05

Joshua Mathews, *Melchizedek's Alternative Priestly Order: A Compositional Analysis of Genesis 14:18-20 and Its Echoes throughout the Tanak*. Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplement 8. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013. Pp. 178. ISBN 978-1-57506-820-6. Paper. \$37.50.

**Christfried Böttrich
Ernst-Moritz-Arndt-Universität Greifswald**

The Melchizedek episode in Gen 14:18-20 lacks nearly everything a proper story needs. An enigmatic pagan priest-king appears out of nowhere, serves a deity named God-Most-High, brings along bread and wine, and, having blessed Abraham, is accepted by him as his superior. No wonder that readers of the text have attempted to fill in these gaps, in former times by creating legendary rewritings and in recent scholarship by producing subtle interpretations. The intertextual link forged by the Epistle to the Hebrews between Gen 14 and Ps 110 does not make the task easier. Accordingly, over the last decades exegetes have produced various proposals to explain these three verses, but with no consensus in view. Despite the discovery of the Qumran scrolls, which has broadened our knowledge of the Melchizedek tradition in early Judaism and its impact on early Christianity, the text of Gen 14 still guards its riddles.

Joshua G. Mathews's book, a dissertation written at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, offers an ambitious and spirited approach to the problem, deliberately swimming against a strong stream of exegetical convictions. Not only does the author decide to concentrate on the text in its final form and read it synchronically—a procedure with many friends among those sceptical about *Literarkritik* and looking for alternatives—he also draws on precritical hermeneutics, pursuing a canonical perspective that considers the link between various, intra-canonical portrayals of Melchizedek as an aspect of textual meaning. In fact, his main concern is to understand Melchizedek as part of the messianic expectations in the Hebrew Bible, derived from Gen 14 itself.

Mathews offers a clear and informative approach. Chapter 1, "Introduction," contains a short overview of past interpreters, covering both the history of reception and the more recent history of research. Despite the long historical perspective, Matthew's discussion is brief, perhaps with good reason—it seems better to sharpen his own contribution than to repeat the long list of past interpreters. He begins with early Jewish (Qumran, Philo, Josephus, *2 Enoch*) and Rabbinic interpreters, moves to the Church Fathers and Lyra, and on to Luther and Calvin. In this rapid

run through the centuries, modern scholarship gets only five pages. Without any doubt Mathews places his emphasis on Reformation theology and its perspectives. One may ask whether there should not be a distinction between early rewritings of the story which claim to be something like *primary religious literature* themselves (as 11QMelchizedek, 2 *Enoch*, and similar texts) and ancient or modern exegetical annotation. Be that as it may, Mathews feels encouraged and in good company to call for a messianic interpretation of Gen 14, to approach it in its final form, and to argue for the unity of the narrative.

In ch. 2, “Methodology of This Study,” Mathews unfolds his approach in detail. He intends for his study to be a compositional analysis, emphasizing the “authorial intent” or “textually oriented meaning” (though one might ask what such an approach could mean after W. Iser’s *Rezeptionsästhetik*—a question that Mathews does not consider). He compares his approach with others, such as a historically or NT-oriented one. He is less interested in these interpretive angles than in the typological hermeneutics of Rashi, Aquinas, and Lyra, whom he introduces at length. Mathews understands the fourfold meaning of scripture employed in the medieval period as especially close to his own compositional analysis. The phenomenon of intertextual relationship is restricted to passages in the Hebrew Bible.

The core of the book is in ch. 3, “Genesis 14:18-20 and the Pentateuch.” It starts with detailed observations on the literary unity of Gen 14:18-20 and its context. Then it continues by asking for an inner-Pentateuchal relationship between Melchizedek in Gen 14 and the expectation of a coming king in Gen 49, Num 23-24 and Deut 32-33. The problem is that Gen 14 itself has no eschatological shape. Mathews has to detect verbal links between these texts to find a textual strategy which includes Gen 14. It is the same with the further links he posits between Melchizedek and the figures of Aaron and Jethro, which are the basis for the main conclusion: “Aaron, who is succeeded genealogically by his sons Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar is the concessive founder of a flawed priestly order. Melchizedek, who is succeeded narratively and compositionally by Jethro, is the founder of a priesthood that is ideal and wholly distinct from Aaron’s—an alternative priestly order” (112).

In ch. 4, “Genesis 14:18-20 and the Prophets and Writings,” Mathews applies the same strategies beyond the Pentateuch, dealing with Ps 110, “echoes” of Melchizedek in texts concerning both the Davidic monarchy and the Jerusalem priesthood, Zech 6 and its portrayal of Joshua, and a few traces in Ezra-Nehemiah. The Melchizedek episode thus provides “a foundation on which the authors of these postexilic texts crafted their conception and eschatological expectation of a royal priesthood” (135). Chapter 5, “Summary, Synthesis, and Further Research,” applies the conclusions to a framework for better understanding Hebrews. A representative bibliography and two indices conclude the book.

Mathews’s book will not be the final word on Gen 14. Those who accept his approach may find arguments for the Melchizedek figure as part of a coherent, compelling system of messianology. Those who do not may use his position as a well-defined one in the ongoing discussion. Without any doubt it stimulates one to read Gen 14:18-20 no longer as an isolated relic but as a text in relation. For that the author deserves thanks.