
Hebrews 7:3: A *Crux Interpretum* Historically Considered

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Dr. Bruce Demarest, now Professor in the Conservative Baptist Seminary in Denver, Colorado, was awarded the Ph.D. degree by the University of Manchester a few years ago for a history of the exegesis of Hebrews 7. In this paper he presents a historical study of one verse in that chapter—that which states that Melchizedek “is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest for ever”.

IN recent years biblical scholarship has shown considerable interest in the history of interpretation of NT texts.¹ A survey of how the church has interpreted a biblical text during its history is a useful practical tool for the exegete. But the unique value of such a study is that it mirrors the church's hermeneutical approach to Scripture through various eras of its history.² From a position of hindsight,³ dogmatic assumptions and interpretative principles adopted by a given “school” in a particular era are identified and held up to the light for objective assessment. To gain further insight into the main hermeneutical emphases of the principal interpretative movements within the church, we propose to survey the interpretation of a key NT text from the Reformation (when exegesis turned the corner from mediaeval to modern practice) to the present. Heb. 7:3, an exegetical conundrum concerning which a wide range of opinion has been

¹ Eg., Stephen Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament: 1861-1961* (New York, 1966); W. G. Kümmel *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems* (London, 1973).

² Kurt Aland cites this as a principal reason for scholarly interest in the history of exegesis of biblical texts. “Luther as an Exegete,” *Expository Times*, 69 (1957-8), 45.

³ Karl Bornhäuser rightly emphasizes that an objective assessment of a given interpretative movement can be made only in retrospect: “No theologian can write concerning the present without considering himself as part of that present, and without permitting his own participation in the movements to influence him.” “The Present Status of Liberal Theology in Germany,” *American Journal of Theology*, 18 (1914), 191.

advanced,⁴ has been selected as the text whose interpretation will be traced.

I. OVERVIEW OF THE TEXT

In the larger section, Heb. 7: 1-10, the ancient figure of Melchizedek is set forth as a paradigm of Christ, the eternal high priest of the New Covenant. Via a selective recitation and subtle reinterpretation of the Gen. 14 narrative, the royal and priestly figure of antiquity is portrayed as one devoid of parentage, descent, commencement and end of life; in these respects the righteous and peaceful monarch is likened to the Son of God himself. The high point of the argument affirms that Melchizedek "continues a priest for ever"⁵. (As an aside we may detect in vs. 3 characteristics of a little hymn⁶ which stresses the absolute eternity of the Melchizedekian order of priesthood.⁷) The interpretative problem encountered in our text may be stated thus: How are the epithets of vs. 3 to be understood in relation to Melchizedek and in what sense are they to be applied to Christ?

II. THE PROTESTANT REFORMERS

Luther's university lectures on Hebrews (delivered at Wittenberg shortly before his Ninety-five Theses were published in October, 1517) were prepared in the form of mediaeval glosses and scholia. Luther formally rejected the scholastic fourfold exegetical schema,⁸ insisting rather on the "double meaning" of Scripture: the plain, outward sense derived from a grammatico-historical exegesis, and a deeper, spiritual sense illuminated by the Holy Ghost. From there it was but a short step to the corollary affirmation that via the inner light of the Spirit the interpreter perceives Christ by faith in all of

⁴ As far back as the 17th century John Owen affirmed: "There are almost as many different analyses given of this . . . as there are commentators upon it. And sometimes the same person proposeth sundry of them, without a determination of what he principally adheres unto." *Exercitations on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (4 vols.; London, 1668-74), III, 89. Wm. Tyndale's observation is not inappropriate to our text: "Twenty doctors expound one text twenty ways, and with an antitheme of half an inch some of them draw a thread of nine days long." *Obedience of a Christian Man*.

⁵ Cf. vs. 8, where it is affirmed of Melchizedek, $\delta\tau\iota$ $\epsilon\sigma\tau\iota$.

⁶ So O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, MK 13 (12th ed.; Göttingen, 1966), 259 ff. Others such as G. Schille, "Erwägungen zur Hohepriesterlehre des Hb.," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 46 (1955), 87, regard vss. 1-3 as the basic hymnodic unit.

⁷ Cf. Heb. 5: 9, 10; 6: 20; 7: 15-17.

⁸ Regarding the traditional Roman Catholic assertion that the Mass was pre-figured by Melchizedek's "sacrifice" of bread and wine, Luther affirms: "Perhaps someone could contrive out of this allegory that just as Melchizedek brings out bread and wine, so Christ brings out the bread of life and the wine of joy, i.e. the Holy Spirit, with his gifts. But allegories of this sort prove nothing. . . . It is hazardous to change the meanings in this way and to depart so far from the literal meaning." *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (57 vols.; Weimar, 1883 ff.), XLII, 539.

Scripture; hence Luther's celebrated maxim: "Christus est punctus mathematicus sacrae scripturae."⁹

Luther's interpretation of our text is profoundly Christological, consistent with his view that the value of Scripture is proportional to its emphasis upon Christ and his Gospel. In the verse preceding our text the attributes "righteousness" and "peace" refer principally to *divine righteousness*, "the very grace by which a man is justified," and *divine peace* which is uniquely "hidden under the cross,"¹⁰ which suggests that Luther ventured to interpret the passage in the light of the justification doctrine of St. Paul. In the scholia to vs. 3—the continuous, spiritualized exposition of the text—Luther's mind was directed entirely beyond Melchizedek to the One whom he foreshadowed. Thus the statements regarding the perpetuity of Melchizedek's person and priesthood are applied directly to *Christ* and are adduced as evidence for his superiority to Levi. Not Melchizedek but *Christ* is the grand theme of vs. 3, consistent with the principle that the interpreter approaches Scripture "mit geistlichen Augen,"¹¹ with the result that "everything in the Scriptures signifies and points principally to the promised Christ."¹²

For an explication of the historical sense one must turn to the glosses—the marginal or interlinear insertions—which affirm that Melchizedek is ἀπᾶτωρ, ἀμήτωρ because his parentage, genealogy, birth and decease are unrecorded in the OT history. Luther endorses the traditional view that Melchizedek was Shem, the most pious of Noah's sons.¹³ Further enunciating Reformation distinctives, Luther remarks that Shem merited distinction in the performance of civil and, especially, religious duties: "he gained a reputation for righteousness because of his service in the church; for he taught the forgiveness of sins through the future Seed of the woman."¹⁴ However, Luther's identification of Melchizedek with Shem—"the chief and true pope"¹⁵—lacks logical connection since the life-data of the latter are recorded in detail elsewhere in Scripture.¹⁶

Calvin, like Luther, interprets Scripture with the presupposition that Christ is to be found therein.¹⁷ Pursuing a typological approach

⁹ *Tischreden, Werke*, II, 439.

¹⁰ *Werke*, LVII, iii, 187, 188.

¹¹ On Psalm 110: 4. *Werke*, XLI, 174.

¹² *Ibid.*, 175.

¹³ *Werke*, LVII, iii, 36.

¹⁴ *Werke*, XLII, 536.

¹⁵ *Werke*, XLI, 176.

¹⁶ Gen. 5: 32; 10: 21 ff.; I Chron. 1: 1-4, 17 ff.

¹⁷ Note a comment on John 5: 29: "Christ is not duly known from any other source than from the Scriptures. But if this is so, it follows that the Scriptures must be read in the expectation that we discover Christ therein." *Corpus Reformatorum* (87 vols.; Brunswig, 1860-1900), LXXXV, 125.

to the text, Calvin rejects the "delirious notion" that Melchizedek was descended from no human parentage or that his life had no ending in favour of the view that the Holy Spirit deliberately concealed the data regarding his descent, birth and decease so that he might prefigure the eternity of Christ. Thus when "Scripture sets forth to us Melchizedek as one who had never been born and never died, it shows to us as in a mirror, that Christ has neither a beginning nor an end."¹⁸ To the spiritually perceptive interpreter the mortal figure of Melchizedek is a vehicle employed by the Holy Spirit to enunciate the doctrine of the absolute eternity of the Son—one of the great "spiritual mysteries of God." In his homiletic exposition of the Melchizedek motif, Calvin extracts a wealth of soteriological meaning from the phrase μήτε ἀρχὴν ἡμερῶν κτλ :

He is . . . without beginning in that he is God eternal and without end in that we have eternal life in him. As it is said in the prophet Isaiah, "as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?" The Church is immortal through the virtue of our Lord Jesus Christ; thus he is with even greater reason without end.¹⁹

III. SOCINIAN INTERPRETERS

Socinian interpretation was conditioned by distinctive dogmatic *a priori*s. This rationalistic, antitrinitarian movement which arose out of the soil of the Reformation was followed by its progeny, Unitarianism, in rejecting Jesus' divinity and the existence of any ontological relation between the latter and the God of the Bible. At most Jesus was a mortal man whose humanity was endowed with extraordinary virtue.

Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), the chief architect of antitrinitarian theology, interpreted vs. 3 not in terms of the *person* of Christ, the antitype of Melchizedek—so the Reformers—but he restricted its meaning to Christ's kingly²⁰ or priestly *office*. According to Socinus, μήτε ἀρχὴν ἡμερῶν κτλ cannot be pressed to affirm that Christ lacked beginning and end of personal existence; the expression signifies only that like his paradigm Melchizedek, Christ lacked the requisite priestly pedigree and that he neither succeeded another nor was he himself succeeded in priesthood.²¹ In other words, Christ's priesthood admits no rivals. The perpetuity attributed to both figures is wholly symbolic. Melchizedek exercised

¹⁸ CR, LXXXIII, 83.

¹⁹ "Trois sermons sur l'histoire de Melchisédec," CR, LI, 649.

²⁰ The Socinians regarded Christ's priestly office as little more than an adjunct to his kingship. So F. Socinus, "Christianae religionis institutio," *Bibliotheca fratrum polonorum*, I, 664. In the Eng. tr. of the *Catechesis racoviensis* of 1605 (*The Racovian Catechism*, trans. by T. Rees [London, 1918]), explication of the prophetic office of Christ fills 180 pages, the priestly office only 10.

²¹ BFP, I, 151; II, 609.

his priesthood for a period of indefinite duration—for as long as the knowledge and worship of the true God flourished amongst his subjects.²² Jesus, on the other hand, became priest only after being liberated from the impediments of humanity and after exchanging mortality for immortality and “divinity” upon his elevation to the heavenly realm.

IV. ROMAN CATHOLIC EXEGETES

Older Catholic theologians tended to interpret vs. 3 through the spectacles of ecclesiastical dogma. Whereas the Reformers nearly lost sight of Melchizedek in their quest to extol Christ, traditional Roman Catholic interpretation focused on the Salemite’s ritual “offering” of bread and wine. This act was regarded as a prefiguration of the sacrifice of the Mass, wherein was effected the transubstantiation of the elements into Christ’s body and blood.

The third verse of what Cornelius a Lapide (1567-1637),²³ the distinguished Flemish exegete, called the “sublime, subtle and allegorical discourse about Melchizedek” was traditionally interpreted on the basis of a *typologia a silentio*, supplemented by a residual interest in the multiple sense hermeneutic of Nicholas of Lyra. Thus, according to a Lapide, the *literal* sense of the text implies that the Canaanite prince who brought the sacrifice of bread and wine entered priestly office not by reason of inheritance or carnal succession but on the basis of divine appointment. However, omission of Melchizedek’s life-data suggests the twofold *allegorical* or spiritual truth that (i) Christ is “fatherless” on earth as man and “motherless” in heaven as God;²⁴ and (ii) Christ is no mortal figure but an eternal and immortal high priest (882). *Literally*, μένει ἱερεὺς εἰς τὸ διηνεκές means that Melchizedek was supplanted by none in priesthood. However the *allegorical* or spiritual sense of the expression is that, “in his Church through his ministers Christ continually offers even to the end of the world the sacrifice of the Mass, . . . wherein by divine power he effects the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into his body and blood” (883). Clearly, older

²² Jonas Schlichting, *Commentarius in epistolam ad Hebraeos* (Racków, 1634), reprinted in *BFP*, IV, 133.

²³ *Commentaria in omnes divi Pauli epistolas* (Antwerp, 1614), which passed through eighty editions in all. Edition cited: Antwerp, 1734.

²⁴ That the terms ἀπάτωρ, ἀμήτωρ signify, respectively, the mysteries of Christ’s humanity and divinity and that ἀγενεαλόγητος points to his divine and ineffable generation from the Father (“as for his generation, who will declare it”) was emphasized by most older Roman Catholic exegetes: e.g., the 18th century Benedictine theologian, A. Calmet, *Commentaire littéral sur tous les livres de l’Ancien et du Nouveau Testament* (9 vols.; Paris, 1724-26³), VIII, 664; the Dutch scholar, W. Estius, *In omnes Pauli epistolas* (7 vols.; Mainz, 1841-5), VI, 183.

Roman Catholic interpretation was thoroughly Christological and sacramental. Solution to exegetical difficulties was sought through perfunctory appeal to the dogmas of the Church.

V. PROPONENTS OF LUTHERAN ORTHODOXY

Lutheran biblical interpretation in the post-Reformation era gradually hardened into a formalistic and quasi-scholastic system. Learned and doggedly persistent theologians compiled massive, multi-volume compendia of orthodox dogma, whereas expositors of Scripture tended to reiterate in copious Latin commentaries the exegetical conclusions of the past.

The distinctive dogmatic flavour of Lutheran orthodoxy is evident in the commentary of Giles Hunnius (1550-1603),²⁵ a leading interpreter in the latter half of the sixteenth century. According to Hunnius, many of the unconverted Jews to whom Hebrews was directed were persuaded that the Messiah was no more than a mere man. The writer countered this error by sketching in vs. 3 a typical representation of the historical Melchizedek (in reality, Enoch *redivivus*) who elegantly adumbrates the "eternal deity of Christ and his ineffable generation from the Father."²⁶ The whole point of the writer's portrayal of Melchizedek was to formulate a rich store of ontological truth about Christ.

The pervasive Christocentricity of old Lutheran exegesis, wherein the Holy Spirit directed beyond the *sensus litterae* to mystical truth about Christ, is everywhere present in the massive commentary of the pillar of seventeenth-century Lutheran orthodoxy, Professor Abraham Calov (1612-1686) of Wittenberg.²⁷ For example, the term ἀγενεαλόγητος, which signifies absence of Melchizedek's genealogical register, conveys higher spiritual truth about the God-man: "His *divine* generation can not be comprehended by the human mind, nor can his *human* generation be paralleled in nature. Neither his divine nor human generation can be sufficiently praised nor adequately represented in words" (III, 1249).

The zenith of scholastic dogmatizing was attained in the copious commentary of Sebastian Schmidt (1617-96),²⁸ the Alsace-born dogmatician and exegete, who affirmed that our text invokes a

²⁵ *Exegesis epistolae ad Hebraeos* (Frankfurt, 1586).

²⁶ "Epistola dedicatoria."

²⁷ *Biblia Novi Testamenti illustrata* (3 vols.; Frankfurt, 1672-76). F. W. Farrar, the nineteenth century student of the history of interpretation, although rightly pointing out the disputative character of the work, criticizes *Biblia* with undue severity when he affirms: it "defends Christianity in the spirit of Antichrist, and turns the words of Eternal Life into an excuse for eternal litigation." *History of Interpretation* (London, 1886), 365.

²⁸ *Commentarius in epistolam Pauli ad Hebraeos* (Strasbourg, 1680). Edition cited: Leipzig, 1722³.

mystery of no mean proportion. For example, not only do ἀπάρτωρ and ἀμήτωρ mystically affirm that Christ is both true man and true God, but they refute any notion of an adoptionist Christology. Had Christ been adopted by the Father, he would be neither "sine patre" nor "sine matre" (617). The level of dogmatic pedantry is reflected in Schmidt's attempt to "prove" the doctrine of the unity and community of human and divine natures in the one, indivisible Christ via appeal to the typological correspondence between Melchizedek and the Son of God. The former, whom the Holy Ghost designated as "patrem non habens" was patently a single man. Since ἀπάρτωρ, ἀμήτωρ depict the two natures of Christ, "how much more, therefore, is Christ the antitype precisely *one* person with *two* natures" (618). The preceding suggests that old Lutheran orthodoxy tended to interpret the Bible painstakingly in light of its credal statements, rather than interrogate the creeds on the basis of Scripture.

VI. REFORMED INTERPRETATION

Reformed interpretation in the seventeenth century experienced a similar but less pronounced hardening of the theological arteries. Laden with dogmatic distinctives, biblical exegesis tended to solidify into an orthodox but lifeless system. In some circles study of the classics stimulated interest in the grammar and philology of the Bible, although such learned and abstract investigations often failed to do justice to the theological content of the text. The French NT scholar Jacques Cappel III (1570-1624)²⁹ is representative of the newer breed of post-Reformation scholars who were occupied with the technical side of exegesis. Like most Reformed interpreters of the period, Cappel regards Melchizedek as a proper type of Christ, although the ground upon which the typology is constructed is more restrictive than that generally allowed. Reluctant to ascribe eternity to Melchizedek either in a literal or symbolic sense, Cappel concedes that the Salemite priest-king prefigures Christ solely on the basis of the titles, "king of righteousness" and "king of peace." In order to avoid postulating the perpetuity of Melchizedek, Cappel proposed the grammatical expedient that a parenthetical "inquam" and a relative "qui" should be inserted into the text of vs. 3 to yield the sense: "Melchizedek . . . , I say, is similar to the Son of God who remains a priest for ever"³⁰ (172).

²⁹ *Observationes in Novum Testamentum*, ed. L. Cappel (Amsterdam, 1657).

³⁰ Reticence to ascribe eternity to Melchizedek is also found in his interpretation of vs. 8b. Reluctant to depart from the philological and historical sense of the text and engage in "mystical exegesis," Cappel argues with unconvincing logic that the subject of εἶη "is Christ, not because Melchizedek would be Christ, but because in the person of Melchizedek Christ tithed Abraham." (175)

Towards the middle of the seventeenth century a movement led by Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669) sought to recapture the living message of the Bible via a typology which became increasingly extravagant. Insisting that Scripture should be made to signify all that it could possibly connote, the school of Cocceius loaded the text with a fullness if not a plurality of meanings. The homiletic commentary of the Dutch scholar Johannes Braun (1628-1708)³¹ reflects the zeal wherewith the school of Cocceius extracted from the text all possible nuances of meaning. The expression μήτε ζῶντι τέλος ἔχων κτλ, for example, establishes Melchizedek as a type of Christ in his immortality for three reasons: (i) in his *personal* capacity, no mention is made in Scripture of his decease; (ii) in his *official* capacity, Melchizedek lives on in the memory of the church as a paradigm of Christ's priesthood and kingship; and (iii) because ultimately after the exercise of royal and priestly offices on earth, Melchizedek was carried up to paradise in a manner similar to the translation to heaven of Enoch and Elijah (381).

Cocceius³² interpreted vs. 3 on the supposition of the organic unity of Old and New Testaments, whereby neither can be rightly understood apart from the other. Vs. 3 then must be interpreted in the light of Melchizedek's role in the patriarchal history: "Melchizedek plays the part of the Son of God so that Christ himself might be seen and that as a Son twice born, if it were possible that he should be born twice" (259).

However, the typological exegesis of the school of Cocceius reached the peak of extravagance in the exposition of the Dutch pastor Johannes d'Outrein (1662-1722).³³ The fruit of twenty years' expository preaching on Hebrews, d'Outrein's commentary is extremely discursive: the two-volume German translation fills more than 3,000 quarto pages. Melchizedek was not merely an exquisite type of Christ (so Braun) or one who "played the part of the Son of God" (so Cocceius); rather the ancient Salemite is judged to have been the *Son of God* himself clothed in human form, whose appearance gave antecedent expression to the priesthood he would formally undertake at his later manifestation. In its straightforward, literal sense, vs. 3 offers compelling proof that the Salemite priest-king was a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Logos. However, the statement that Melchizedek "resembles" the Son of God tends to undermine the Christophany thesis: i.e., "simile non est idem." Yet d'Outrein argues from classical philology that ἀπό in compound with a verb

³¹ *Commentarius in epistolam ad Hebraeos* (Amsterdam, 1705).

³² *Epistola ad Hebraeos* (Leyden, 1659).

³³ Ger. tr.: *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (4 pts. in 2 vols.; Frankfurt & Leipzig, 1713-18). Citations are from vol. I, pt. ii.

serves to strengthen the force of the word. Ἀπό thus emphasizes the *perfection of likeness* which exists between the two figures.

When the apostle employed the word ἀφομοιωμένος, he wished to declare that both the personal characteristics and the features affirmed of Melchizedek perfectly agree with those attributed to Christ in the Gospel. Thus Melchizedek would be the eternal King and Priest, that is, Christ himself. Who can be perfectly compared with the Son of God save the Son of God himself? (Ps. 89: 6; Deut. 33: 26) (233)

Lest the reader judge that the preceding amounts to a *reductio ad absurdum*, d'Outrein suggests that one may legitimately be compared with himself from the standpoint of various personal circumstances: e.g., before and after conversion, or in youth vs. maturity. Thus although one's personal identity remains unaltered, there is a sense in which he whose life is compared at different stages may declare, "*ego non sum ego.*"

VII. PURITAN EXPOSITORS

Biblical interpretation in Puritan circles fell to the lot of the "doctor" or teaching minister who was charged with the task of expounding sound doctrine in accord with the Scriptural mandate, "give attendance . . . to doctrine."³⁴ Explication of the "strange and uncouth" epithets by John Owen,³⁵ the foremost Puritan expositor of Hebrews, is on the whole responsible and restrained. Silence in respect of Melchizedek, a descendent of Japheth the progenitor of the great company of Gentiles who were to constitute the Church of God (III, 93), affords a comprehensive delineation of the mysteries of Christ's person and priestly office.

However, the rigorous doctrinal flavour of the Puritan biblical homilies is captured by William Gouge (1578-1653),³⁶ whose thirty-five years of distinguished ministry at the London church of St. Anne Blackfriars earned him the title, "the father of London ministers."³⁷ On the positive side, the Holy Ghost deliberately concealed Melchizedek's life-data in order to communicate orthodox doctrine in respect of Christ. Thus when taken together, ἀπό τῶν ἀπῆτῶν offer compelling support for the dogma of the hypostatic union of Christ's human and divine natures. Negatively, the mysteries inherent in the epithets of vs. 3 refute most of the Christological heresies which have assailed the true Church. Among these may be mentioned: the fallacies of the *Proclianites* and *Cerdonians* (Christ came not in human

³⁴ I Tim. 4: 13.

³⁵ *Exercitations on Hebrews* (4 vols.; London, 1668-74).

³⁶ *A Learned and Very Useful Commentary on the Whole Epistle to the Hebrews* (2 vols.; London, 1655). References pertain to vol. I of the work. The commentary is a compilation of 1,000 "Wednesday's Lectures" on the Epistle delivered over a period of three decades.

³⁷ Daniel Neal, *History of the Puritans* (2 vols.; London, 1811), II, 366.

flesh); the *Manichees* (Christ came in a feigned species of flesh); the *Valentinians* (Christ came with a spiritual or celestial body); the *Apollinarists* (Christ took a soul-less flesh); the *Arians* (Christ was a created being with a certain beginning); the *Ubiquitarians* (Christ's humanity was endowed with perfect omnipresence, etc.); and the *Samosatenians* (Christ's personal existence commenced with his incarnation) (II, 137). Thus far-reaching dogmatic issues found a prominent place in Puritan interpretation of our text.

VIII. ARMINIAN INTERPRETATION

Arminian theology was a reaction to and protest against confessional Calvinism. In opposition to post-Reformation orthodoxy's tendency to treat Scripture as a reservoir of dogmatic proof-texts, the Arminians sought to interpret the Bible as any other literary document solely on the basis of historical and philological considerations. With the swing of the pendulum, unswerving assent to the creeds was supplanted by an Erasmian indifference to dogma. Where the Arminians most closely approximated the goal of a non-credal exegesis agreeable to reason, their explication of Scripture was predictably deficient in religious and theological intuition.

Jurist, statesman, historian and theologian, Hugo Grotius (1583-1645)³⁸ was one of the commanding figures of seventeenth-century Europe. Grotius' emphasis upon the historical side of exegesis leads him to pose the question: "Who was Melchizedek?" Guidance to the problem is found in a treatise of the ancient Phoenician Sanchuniathon (fourteenth or thirteenth century B.C.) who wrote on the procreation of the deities, the generation of the universe and the origins of civilization. Grotius supposes that Melchizedek was the astrological deity who in the Phoenician treatise bears the name Σὺδὺκ (II, 1030). Hence the perpetuity of Melchizedek's ministration is explained on the assumption that he continued in priesthood "as long as the cult of the true God continued in Phoenicia" (II, 1032). The Phoenician astral god highlights leading features of the NT priest to come: i.e., a ministrant whose parentage, birth and death are unknown. Thus, in contrast to traditional Reformed and Lutheran interpretation, Grotius is reluctant to deduce from vs. 3 detailed ontological statements about Christ; the latter is merely a non-legal priest-king who exercises an uninterrupted ministration as long as need exists. Having borrowed extensively from Socinian interpretation, Grotius the generalist made little independent penetration into the meaning of our text. Hence there may be a shred of truth in E. G. Robinson's dictum, that "it is ordained of Almighty

³⁸ "Annotationes in Vetus et Novum Testamentum," in *Opera omnia theologica* (3 vols.; Amsterdam, 1679).

God that the man who dips into everything never gets to the bottom of anything.”³⁹

Likewise guided by the principle that the NT must be interpreted as any other document, J. J. Wettstein (1673-1754) sought to elucidate the meaning of Scripture by formal appeal to a host of literary “parallels” drawn from classical and rabbinical literature. The Remonstrant’s theological rationalism (Wettstein, e.g., did little to conceal his disdain for the doctrine of Christ’s divinity) is reflected in the freedom with which he included a number of far-fetched “parallels” in the literary apparatus to his Greek Testament.⁴⁰ By way of illustrating the words ἀπάτωρ, ἀμήτωρ Wettstein cites from the *Onomasticon* of Pollux (III, 26), wherein Athena is designated ἀμήτωρ by virtue of the fact that when the head of Zeus was cleft by an axe, the goddess emerged to life. Likewise Hephaestus (the god of the smithy fire) is denoted as ἀπάτωρ since he was begotten by Hera alone who cast her offspring out of heaven when it became apparent that he was deformed. Yet Wettstein also directs attention to citations from Eusebius⁴¹ and Josephus⁴² where the same words relate to the absence of parentage in the Levitical genealogies. In any case, the argument of vs. 3 is regarded as an allegorical exposition akin to that devised by the rabbis (II, 386).

A further example of the Arminian reaction to credal Calvinism and particularly to the elaborate typology of the school of Cocceius was the French biblical scholar Jean Le Clerc (1657-1736),⁴³ who imbibed Socinian doctrines while a student. Insisting on the primacy of reason in the deduction of religious truth, Le Clerc judges that the epithets ἀπάτωρ, ἀμήτωρ, ἀγενεολόγητος signify only that the names and accomplishments of Melchizedek’s ancestors had been forgotten with the passing of time. Le Clerc deems it highly unlikely that Melchizedek was ordained to serve as an image of Christ, either in respect of his *person* (absence of parentage, birth and decease) or his *priesthood* (lacking predecessor and successor, bearer of an eternal ministration). On the contrary, guided by the old Jewish superstition that the Messiah ought to resemble Melchizedek, the writer fashioned an *ad hominem* argument to demonstrate the superiority of Christ’s priesthood to that of Levi. Le Clerc concludes with the hermeneutical observation: “the figurative exposition developed by the author of Hebrews ought not to be encouraged at

³⁹ Quoted by A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, Pa., 1907), 740.

⁴⁰ *H KAINH AIAΘHKH: Novum Testamentum graecum* (2 vol.; Amsterdam, 1751-52).

⁴¹ *H.E.* I. 3.

⁴² *Antiq.* XI. 3. 10.

⁴³ *Novum Testamentum domini nostri Jesu Christi cum paraphrasi et adnotationibus H. Hammondii* (2 vols.; Amsterdam, 1698).

the present time, because such a method of explaining Scripture has fallen out of currency" (II, 324).

Arminian reluctance to apply our text to Christ is further evidenced in the works of such eighteenth-century English scholars as Daniel Whitby (1638-1726)⁴⁴ and James Peirce (1674-1726).⁴⁵ Whitby, whose latitudinarian tendencies blossomed into full-grown Unitarianism, affirms that the expression ἀπ᾽ ἄνω, ἀμήτωρ . . . ζῶντος τέλους ἔχων bears reference only to Melchizedek (a priesthood without pedigree, beginning and end), since Christ possessed a mother in respect of his humanity and, furthermore, since his priestly office had a clear point of beginning.⁴⁶ Moreover ἀφωμοιωμένος τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ in no wise establishes a correspondence between Melchizedek and Christ, but affirms that the former (insofar as he is represented as one who had no end of life and who thus remains a priest forever) was "like to a son of God, or to *one of the angels* who are immortal and never cease to be"⁴⁷ (II, 540). Peirce attempts to minimize the Christological content of vs. 3 by an argument which is no less subtle. Consistent with a valid classical usage, ἀρχὴν in the phrase μήτε ἀρχὴν ἡμερῶν should be taken in an *adverbial* sense, with the force of "prorsus", "plane" or "omnino." Peirce's paraphrase of vs. 3 reads thus: "Melchizedek . . . was without any priestly descent either by his father's or mother's side, *having not any end of all his days or life*, but was made like unto the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who abideth a priest continually" (119). Peirce's Christology—particularly the notion that the Son was begotten by the Father in time—appears to have dictated the terms of his exegesis and obviated the possibility of ascribing to Christ a priesthood which was eternal *a parte ante*.⁴⁸

IX. RATIONALISTIC INTERPRETATION

Eighteenth-century pietistic interpreters insisted that the symbolic affirmations in vs. 3 convey absolute truth in respect of Christ: i.e., his eternal origin and permanence.⁴⁹ Contrariwise, rationalistic exegetes argued that the traditional belief, smothered by pre-scientific conceptions and irrelevant dogmas, must be discarded in favour of a

⁴⁴ *A Paraphrase and Commentary on the New Testament* (2 vols.; London, 17607).

⁴⁵ *A Paraphrase and Notes on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London, 1727).

⁴⁶ Luke 3: 21 ff.

⁴⁷ Whitby argues that υἱός denotes an angel from the fact that "Bene Heloim" (MT) = ἀγγέλοι τοῦ θεοῦ (LXX): e.g., Job 1: 6; 2: 1. Cf. Job 38: 7.

⁴⁸ Nevertheless Peirce remarks: "I can't say that I have the key of this discourse, or that my account gives me intire [*sic*] satisfaction." (121).

⁴⁹ So the Württemberg pietists J. R. Hedinger, *Das Neue Testament unseres Herrn und Heylands Jesu Christi* (Rudolstadt, 1724), and J. A. Bengel, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (Tübingen, 1773).

more enlightened hermeneutical approach. The celebrated Göttingen orientalist and theologian, Johann David Michaelis (1717-91) represents a bridge from a pietistic to a rationalistic interpretation of our text. In his earlier work on Hebrews Michaelis reiterated the orthodox opinion that vs. 3 is a typological affirmation descriptive of the eternity of Christ.⁵⁰ However in his much later definitive work⁵¹ Michaelis renounces the view that the silence of the OT in respect of Melchizedek constitutes the latter a type of Christ. On face value ἀφωμοιωμένος τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ appears to be a statement devised for the purpose of representing the Salemite priest-king as a figure of the Messiah in respect of sundry personal or priestly features. However, Michaelis proposes an alternative to the typological construction by appealing to his thesis that the Greek text of Hebrews is a translation from a Hebrew original. Thus the definite article before "son" (absent in the supposed Hebrew original) was added to the Greek text by the translator on dogmatic grounds. Theorizing that the text ought to read: "he (i.e. Melchizedek) is similar to a son of God," Michaelis (like the Arminian Whitby) concludes that the author "regarded Melchizedek as an angel whose father, mother, family, birth and death could not be reported."⁵²

Other rationalistic interpreters countered the orthodox Christological interpretation of the text by arguing that vs. 3 must be regarded as an *argumentum ex concessis* directed to the superstitions and sectarian prejudices of first-century Jews who would have identified one who lacked birth and death with the Son of God. Thus Johann Semler (1725-91)⁵³ who after repudiating early pietistic influences subsequently merited the title, "the father of German rationalism,"⁵⁴ argued under the banner of a historico-critical method that ἀπάτωρ, ἀμήτωρ, . . . μένει ἱερεὺς εἰς τὸ διηνεκές is not a statement of universal validity, but one which fulfilled only a temporary purpose in respect of the ancient Jewish addressees. Thus vs. 3 ought not to be taken as a basis for specific typological statements about Christ: "we ought not torture ourselves with such forced propositions about the type, which are for us irrelevant and for the Jews most useless." Semler the rationalist maintains that the most that can be said of Melchizedek is that he "had a good innate knowledge of the true God" (126).

⁵⁰ *Peircii paraphrasis et notae philologicae atque exegeticae in epistolam ap Hebraeos* (Halle, 1747), 276.

⁵¹ *Erklärung des Briefes an die Hebräer* (Frankfurt & Leipzig, 1780-86²).

⁵² *Ibid.*, 232.

⁵³ "Beiträge zu genauerer Einsicht des Briefes an die Hebräer," in S. J. Baumgarten's *Erklärung des Briefes St. Pauli an die Hebräer* (Halle, 1763).

⁵⁴ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., XXIV, 630.

Still other rationalists sought to interpret our text in terms of the philosophical categories of such contemporary thinkers as Kant (d. 1804) and Hegel (d. 1831). This tendency in exegesis is epitomized by H. E. G. Paulus (1761-1851),⁵⁵ the Heidelberg theologian who was popularly acclaimed "the true patriarch of rationalism."⁵⁶ Characterized as "a man who thinks that he believes and believes that he thinks,"⁵⁷ Paulus viewed the founder of Christianity as merely a man of unexcelled moral virtue and steadfastness of conviction. The writer of Hebrews allegorized the Gen. 14 and Ps. 110 texts traditionally applied to the Messiah so as to promote his own conception of Jesus as the founder and chief ministrant of a new moral religion. The statements of vs. 3 were devised by the author to underscore Jesus' affinity with the Messiah of Jewish expectation.

Undoubtedly the author in his own mind referred these particulars to the "Messiasgeist" embodied in Jesus, in respect of which neither origin, nor beginning, nor ending of his life could be given up, which earmarks him as God's Messiah and Son. (80)

Paulus repeatedly employs "Messiasgeist" as a designation of Jesus' messianic character. Contemporary philosophical idealism influenced Paulus' conception of Jesus as a man in whom the *Geist* of the Messiah made its abode. The notion of the spirit of the Messiah divinely implanted in the human Jesus was not inimical to Paulus' naturalistic conception of a non-unique Jesus or of the Christian religion. As Paulus himself remarks: "that such a spirit should be found in a human body is itself a miracle."⁵⁸

X. CRITICAL COMMENTATORS

The subjectivity of rationalistic interpretation prompted nineteenth-century biblical scholarship to return to the more secure moorings of an exacting philological, grammatical and historical exegesis which fundamentally sought to uncover the design of the author and the meaning of the text for those to whom it was addressed. Exegetical proposals followed three principal lines of approach, in most cases the interpreter's basic commitment to reformational or rationalistic hermeneutics being apparent. Whereas F. Delitzsch (1857) and B. F. Westcott (1889) in the nineteenth century and contemporary exegetes such as C. Spicq (1953), F. F. Bruce (1965) and O. Kuss (1966) commend the traditional view that Melchizedek was an historical type of Christ's person and priest-

⁵⁵ *Des Apostels Paulus Ermahnungs-Schreiben an die Hebräer-Christen* (Heidelberg, 1833).

⁵⁶ F. Lichtenberger, *History of German Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1889), 21.

⁵⁷ *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie: 1875-1912*, XXV, 293.

⁵⁸ *Das Leben Jesu* (2 vols.; Heidelberg, 1828), I, xi.

hood, others insist that vs. 3 must be understood in either a strictly literal or in an idealized sense. A literal approach to our text was championed by the mediating theologian Franz Bleek (1793-1859) whose rigorous three-volume commentary⁵⁹ ranks him as one of the distinguished commentators of Hebrews of all times. According to Bleek, the expression ἀπάτωρ, ἀμήτωρ . . . μήτε ζωῆς τέλος ἔχων in no wise lends itself to the figurative explanation based on the silence of Scripture. Rather the plain literal sense of the text which suggests that Melchizedek possessed no human ancestry is to be preferred: "We propose that Melchizedek was placed on earth and later removed directly by divine omnipotence, as an incarnation of a divine spirit or, at least, of a heavenly being" (III, 322). The principal similarity between the two heavenly figures resides in "the continuance of their respective offices apart from the interruption of death" (III, 62). The writer's insistence upon the continuance of Melchizedek's priesthood (μένει ἱερεὺς κτλ) raises the question of the *terminus ad quem* of his ministration. To avoid bringing Melchizedek's priesthood into collision with that of Christ, Bleek conjectures that the Salemite's priestly service (which continued after his translation from earth) terminated with the elevation of the Son of God to the heavenly realm.

Proponents of a thoroughgoing symbolic approach insist that the statements about Melchizedek take on meaning only in relation to Christ. "Who is able to believe", asks F. A. G. Tholuck (1799-1877),⁶⁰ "that a Christian apostle would attribute an eternal existence to Melchizedek in the same way as to God's only begotten Son?" (290) The statements about his eternal existence and perpetuity in priesthood can only be understood in the sense of the eternal continuance of the type in the antitype (295). Expressed otherwise, the predicates of vs. 3 are true of Melchizedek in the sense that they are absolutely true of Christ. In a similar vein, the Strasbourg church historian Eduard Reuss (1804-91) argues that the author's subtle resumé was not intended to relate a more or less curious scene in the life of a man; rather he depicts Melchizedek as a figure endowed with an ideal existence.⁶¹ In Roman Catholic circles, Aloys Schaeffer (1853-1914) of Münster likewise insists that vs. 3 depicts Melchizedek as an idealized representation of the NT priest-king, the life of the former being wholly absorbed into the supernatural life of the Son of God.⁶²

⁵⁹ *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (3 vols.; Berlin, 1828-40).

⁶⁰ *Kommentar zum Briefe an die Hebräer* (Hamburg, 1850³).

⁶¹ "L'Épître aux Hébreux," in *La Bible: Nouveau Testament* (6 vols.; Paris, 1876-78), V, 59 ff.

⁶² *Erklärung des Hebräerbriefes* (Münster, 1893), 191 ff.

XI. PIETISTIC INTERPRETATION

In reaction to naked rationalism and sterile orthodoxy, pietistic interpreters tended to minimize the critical aspects of exegesis by regarding scientific theology as the husk rather than the kernel of biblical studies. One stream of interpreters sought to unfold the deeper spiritual implications of the Bible via a vigorous pneumatic exegesis⁶³ which occasionally overlooked the plain grammatico-historical sense. Karl August Auberlen (1824-64),⁶⁴ one of the leading nineteenth-century representatives of Württemberg pietism, illustrates this spiritualizing tendency in exegesis. Rejecting the *argumentum ex silentio* approach to vs. 3, Auberlen develops the thesis advanced by the fourth-century monk, Marcus Eremita. The negative statements of vs. 3 elevate Melchizedek above the Levites to a higher level of priesthood dependent not upon any fleshly considerations but "solely on the basis of his inner, spiritual relationship with God" (492). The positive statements of the text constitute the principal resemblance between the two priestly figures. The Levitical priest (a paradigm of dead works condemned by the law) was a carnal ministrant who discharged his ritual service apart from a living communion with God. However, Melchizedek, who stood in a vivifying relation with the living God, rendered his priestly service in spirit, truth and power. Thus μένει ἱερεὺς κτλ implies that Melchizedek, "who served the living God in truth, is precisely through this communion with God removed from the power of death" (495). In particular, Melchizedek is an OT paradigm of the host of priest-kings of the New Covenant who minister before the throne of God day and night:⁶⁵ "Melchizedek is thus an eternal priest in no other sense than according to the Apocalypse *all the blessed spirits are eternal priests*" (497).

In quest of pregnant spiritual meaning, other interpreters saw in Melchizedek a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God. Judging from sermons on this text, not a few preachers have adopted this approach with the rationale that greater honour would be ascribed thereby to Christ and the Scriptures. Adam Welch (1831-1902),⁶⁶ a conservative Scottish clergyman, discounts the idea that Melchizedek is a type of Christ on the basis of the silence of the OT. The process of extracting from an obscure and mysterious primitive account certain *negative* notions and translating these into far-

⁶³ Note Auberlen's estimate of the writer's use of Ps. 110: 4 in Hb. 7: 3: "He displays the 'Geistestiefen' of the Psalm to us as it unfolds itself to the 'Geistesauge'." (459)

⁶⁴ "Melchizedek's ewiges Leben und Priesterthum: Hebr. 7.," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 30 (1857), 453-504.

⁶⁵ Cf. Rev. 7: 15; see also Rev. 1: 6; 5: 10; 20: 6.

⁶⁶ *The Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh & London, 1898).

reaching *positive* declarations via process of “intellectual legerdemain” is contrary to the principles of sound reasoning and interpretations. As for the *argumentum ex silentio* method Welch affirms: “This casuistical exposition, interpolated in the middle of a noble Epistle, is the fly which spoils the whole apothecary’s ointment” (38). The mysterious sayings about Melchizedek are clarified when one recognizes that ἔχων (“having”) and ἀφωμοιωμένος (“resembling”) are causal participles which explain *why* Melchizedek is denominated ἀπάτωρ, ἀμήτωρ (64). The latter lacks parentage and genealogy precisely *because* he possesses neither beginning of days nor end of life. Similarly μένει ἱερεὺς κτλ simply but forcefully affirms that Melchizedek was, is and will continue a priest for ever. The conclusion drawn from the literal and unadorned reading of the text is that “Melchizedek was an OT Christophany,” one of the several pre-incarnate appearances of the Son of God (83).

XII. RELIGIONSGESCHICHTE

Stimulated by the religio-historical researches of W. Bousset (d. 1920), R. Reitzenstein (d. 1931) and H. Gunkel (d. 1932), exegetes from the closing decades of the nineteenth century began to look beyond the cradle of Christianity to the surrounding Hellenistic world for the genesis of leading biblical motifs. As a result of this trend, interpretation during the twentieth century (especially in Continental circles) has been dominated by the conviction that the NT represents the consummation of an evolutionary process of development from the primitive mythological conceptions of extra-biblical religions.

The history of religions approach to vs. 3 generally regards Melchizedek as a supra-human mythical figure whose main features have been carried over from Philonic, Gnostic or Eastern Mystery sources. Eugène Ménégoz (1838-1921),⁶⁷ the Reformed professor of theology at Paris, is representative of those who argue that the religious philosophy of Philo exercised a pervasive influence upon our text. The cultured Alexandrian convert to Christianity who penned the Epistle was stimulated by Philo, the latter having sketched Melchizedek as an allegorical figure of the Logos whose father being God and his mother wisdom⁶⁸ was unbegotten by human parentage. Our author’s allegorical interpretation of the OT, his elucidation of mystical meanings from the silence of the text, and his assimilation of the priest-king of Salem to the Son of God demonstrate his thorough-going dependence upon Philo. Ménégoz further argues that the Philonic inspired statements of vs. 3 suggest that the Son of

⁶⁷ *La théologie de l’Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris, 1894).

⁶⁸ *De fug.* 109.

God was not a divine being coequal with God, but a created celestial being of the first rank. Ἀπᾶτωρ, ἀμήτωρ, ἀγενεολόγητος convey the idea that like the first man Adam, the Son of God is the first of his order of species, brought into existence by a special creative act of God.

The metaphorical idea of an eternal generation is alien to the author. One would be mistaken to take μήτε ἀρχὴν ἡμερῶν ἔχων as an absolute affirmation that the Son of God, like Melchizedek, "has no beginning of days." These words . . . signify that the life of Christ did not commence with his birth. Christ was not born. He is the immediate and primordial product of the creative power of God (82).

Thus Ménégos appeals to Philonic *religionsgeschichtlich* data to construct from vs. 3 a classical Arian Christology.

According to Heinrich Weinel (1874-1936),⁶⁹ the Jena biblical theologian, Melchizedek was the sacred figure of a Jewish Gnostic sect and thus must be contemplated as a heavenly being who made a fleeting visit to earth in human guise. That the author could represent such a figure as one devoid of parentage, commencement and end of life can only be regarded as "ein Meisterstück der wunderlichen Bibelauslegung jener Tage!" (413).

Hans Windisch (1881-1935),⁷⁰ who wrote extensively on the influence of Near Eastern religions on Christianity, was a leading advocate of the *religionsgeschichtlich* method of NT studies during the first third of the present century. The fact that Melchizedek is of no relevance to man's religious situation and that as the prototype of Jesus he retires from view altogether, suggests that our text has incorporated a strand of apocalyptic Melchizedek speculation foreign to the world of Scripture. The author of Hebrews derived his conception of the heavenly Melchizedek from the Gnostic conception of Enoch (Metatron), the pre-diluvian mythical figure who in the Slavonic Book of Enoch and the so-called "Mandean" III Enoch⁷¹ was elevated above the angelic inhabitants of heaven and invested with extraordinary high-priestly dignity.⁷² Having clarified the decisive *religionsgeschichtlich* issue, the text is amenable to ready explication; ἀπᾶτωρ, ἀμήτωρ, depict Melchizedek's mysterious, supra-human origin. The unbounded duration of his life (μήτε ἀρχὴν ἡμερῶν κτλ) is to be viewed in the light of the myth that

⁶⁹ *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen, 1928).

⁷⁰ *Der Hebräerbrief*, HNT 14 (Tübingen, 1931²).

⁷¹ Windisch maintains that these "Mandean" writings serve as Oriental commentaries to the Epistle. Primitive Oriental Gnosticism which underlay the Mandaean religion blended with Jewish Gnosticism to yield a Christian gnosis which accounts for much of the mystical elements of Hebrews 7. "Vorwort" to *Hebräerbrief*.

⁷² For a detailed account of the role of Metatron in Jewish-Gnostic mysticism see: Hugo Odeberg, *III Enoch* (Cambridge, 1937).

he never succumbed to death, but that he was miraculously removed from earth like Enoch the antediluvian saint.

Ernst Käsemann (b. 1906),⁷³ the outstanding contemporary advocate of a history of religions approach to the NT, likewise insists that our text is heavily indebted to extra-biblical mythological traditions. Käsemann points to late Jewish-Gnostic texts where the *Urmensch* or Primal Man (who as first-begotten of the world was also high priest) was identified with a range of historical and mythical figures from earliest times: i.e., Enoch, Moses, Elijah-Phineas, Metatron and Michael. The interpretative key to our text is that in the various Gnostic Adam writings *Melchizedek* likewise is found to be an incarnation of the Primal Man.

Melchizedek, who is denoted as a great high priest, discharges his office at the middle point on earth and is then buried there, as the same is true of Adam according to ancient speculations. In the Christian *Book of Adam in the East* this is represented in such a way that Melchizedek ministers at the grave of Adam, bears the body of Adam to the hill of Calvary and is thus the link between the high priest Adam and Christ, the third high priest (130).

The statements of vs. 3 regarding the absence of origin, birth and decease of Melchizedek are to be taken in the plain literal sense in light of the Gnostic Anthropos myth.

XIII. QUMRAN RESEARCH

In 1956 thirteen fragments of a scroll in which Melchizedek figured prominently were discovered by Bedouin shepherds in what is now known as Qumran Cave 11. Publication of the text of 11 QMelch,⁷⁴ which O. Michel has proclaimed as "a new turning in Melchizedek research,"⁷⁵ has stimulated a fresh re-examination of the consciousness of the writer when penning the words of Heb. 7: 3. Assigned by A. S. van der Woude to the first half of the first Christian century,⁷⁶ 11 QMelch *prima facie* depicts Melchizedek as an eschatological angel who in the day of salvation announces release for the elect and executes judgement upon Belial and his band of perverse spirits. In the most significant part of the fragment (lines 10, 11), Ps. 82: 1, 2 is cited and (according to van der Woude) its meaning is transferred to Melchizedek: "as it is written (10) concerning him in the hymns of David who says: 'The heavenly one (*'elôhim: sing.*) standeth in the congregation of God; among the heavenly ones (*'elôhîm: pl.*) he judgeth', and concerning him he says: 'Above them (11) return thou on

⁷³ *Das wandernde Gottesvolk: Eine Untersuchung zum Hebräerbrief* (Göttingen, 1961⁴).

⁷⁴ A. S. van der Woude, "Melchizedek als himmlische Erlösergestalt in den neugefundenen eschatologischen Midraschim aus Qumran-Höhle XI," *Oudtestamentische Studiën*, XIV (Leiden, 1965), 354-73.

⁷⁵ *Hebräer*, 559.

⁷⁶ *Op. cit.*, 357.

high; God shall judge the nations.' ”⁷⁷ On the basis of this Qumran text van der Woude maintains that while penning the words of Heb. 7: 3 the author was influenced by the same first century Jewish sectarian expectation reflected in 11 QMelch, which regarded Melchizedek as a heavenly warrior-redeemer (likely the archangel Michael).

Not long after the *editio princeps*, van der Woude in conjunction with another Dutch scholar, M. de Jonge,⁷⁸ made minor refinements of interpretation in 11 QMelch⁷⁹ and sought to explicate in greater detail the new light cast upon our text by this first century Qumran scroll. The statements of vs. 3 were not formulated from the OT texts via an *argumentum ex silentio*, but were devised on the basis of an extant oral or written tradition.

It seems much easier to assume that the author really meant what he wrote. On the evidence of 11 QMelch, the most plausible inference is that he regarded Melchizedek as an (arch-)angel, who appeared to Abraham long ago (321).

But lest his readers be tempted to elevate Melchizedek above Christ himself (as did the later Gnostic Melchizedekians), the author of Hebrews deliberately subordinated the dignity of the heavenly archangel to that of the eternal Son by the qualifying clause, ἀφωμοιωμένος δὲ τῷ υἱῷ τοῦ θεοῦ.

Yigael Yadin, professor of archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, wrote a short article⁸⁰ in which he offered an estimate of the relevance of 11 QMelch to an understanding of Heb. 7: 3. In an earlier study on the relationship of Hebrews to the Dead Sea Scrolls,⁸¹ Yadin posed but left unanswered the question: “how and why did the author [of Hebrews] come to use Melchizedek as his main theme?” With the discovery and publication of 11 QMelch the mystery has been immeasurably clarified.

It now seems that we have the answer; since Melchizedek was considered to have such a heavenly position, as well as an active role as an eschatological saviour, in the Qumranite theology, the writer chose him deliberately, in order to convey more intimately and decisively his perception of Jesus' unique position (154).

⁷⁷ Attention is also drawn to lines 24, 25 where the text reads: “Thy heavenly one (*’ēlohāyik*) is king.” According to van der Woude, this refers to Melchizedek's dominion by virtue of his defeat of Belial and his band of perverse spirits. *Op. cit.*, 368.

⁷⁸ “11Q Melchizedek and the New Testament,” *New Testament Studies*, 12 (1965-66), 301-26.

⁷⁹ Principally reluctance to assert the unqualified identification of Melchizedek with the archangel Michael. *Op. cit.*, 305. “11QMelch gives no certain reference to a (high-) priesthood of Melchizedek. He is so much ‘God's warrior’ that his priestly activities remain completely in the shadow.” *Op. cit.*, 306.

⁸⁰ “A Note on Melchizedek and Qumran,” *Israel Exploration Journal*, 15 (1965), 152-54.

⁸¹ “The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, 4 (1958), 36-55.

While a few Qumran scholars believe that 11 QMelch depicts a terrestrial figure,⁸² the majority interpret Heb. 7: 3 in the light of the scrolls' representation of Melchizedek as a heavenly angel-warrior.

XIV. CONCLUSION

Interpretation orientated towards Arminian and rationalistic theology manifests a preference for accepting vs. 3 in its literal sense, often by appealing to mythological motifs from apocalyptic, Philonic, Gnostic or Eastern Mystery sources. Such an approach tends to depreciate even a cautious typological exegesis, thereby minimizing the Christological implications of our text. Some interpreters favour the alternative explanation that vs. 3 is an allegorical argument by way of concession to the superstitions of first-century Jews, who were inclined to see in Melchizedek the outline of the Messiah. The same literal approach to the text advocated by liberal exegetes has been adopted by some expositors in the pietistic or evangelical traditions who deduce from a plain reading of vs. 3 that Melchizedek was a pre-incarnate manifestation of Christ. On the other hand, orthodox Protestant and traditional Roman Catholic interpretation by and large maintains that the author has regard for the historic figure of Melchizedek sketched in Gen. 14: 17 ff. and Ps. 110: 4, and that vs. 3 should be viewed as a typological argument which conveys truth about the person and priesthood of Christ.

Rather than suppose that the author was guided by late myths about a supernatural heavenly being, it is safer to conclude that the statements of vs. 3 were stimulated by the Messianic prophecy of Psalm 110: 4. Since the full significance of the Psalm-text was not immediately clear, the writer, whose mind was steeped in the OT, turned to Gen. 14: 17 ff. to discover what the Psalmist intended by the words, "priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek." Via a careful typological exegesis of the Pentateuchal narrative, the writer explicates the uniqueness and eternity of the Christian's high priest. The monumental rabbinic commentary of Strack-Billerbeck⁸³ sheds valuable light upon the ancient idiom preserved in our text. Noting that ἀπότωρ and ἀμήτωρ were commonly employed both in Greek and Jewish circles to indicate absence of recorded parentage,⁸⁴

⁸² Eg., J. Carmignac, "Le document de Qumran sur Melchisédek," *Revue de Qumran* VII (1970), 343-78. Judging that the two references to 'elôhîm in the citation from Ps. 82: 1 relate to God and the heavenly congregation, respectively, Carmignac views the Melchizedek depicted in the scroll as a human warrior-chief, who would emulate in his person features of the biblical Melchizedek. *Op. cit.*, 367.

⁸³ *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (4 vols.; Munich, 1922-28).

⁸⁴ Bereshith R. XVIII. 18. 2; Philo, *De ebr.* 61; *Quis rer.* 62.

Strack-Billerbeck argue that the writer designated Melchizedek thus because the names of his mother, father and ancestors were omitted from the priestly genealogies. Paternal descent from Aaron⁸⁵ and maternal descent from a pure Israelite⁸⁶ were necessary requirements for priesthood, and he who was incapable of proving Levitical descent was disqualified from priestly service.⁸⁷ According to Josephus a diaspora Jew who aspired to priesthood was obliged to dispatch to Jerusalem a certified record of his priestly ancestry.⁸⁸ Thus the first triad of epithets sketch Melchizedek as a model or type of Christ in his *priesthood*: Jesus had no link with the disenfranchised tribe of Levi, but on the basis of personal worth and divine appointment he was chief ministrant of a unique priestly order. The phrase μήτε ἀρχὴν ἡμερῶν κτλ, likewise formulated from the silence of the OT history, represents Melchizedek as a type of Christ in his *person* or nature. Illuminating here is the rabbinic maxim: "quod non in thora non in mundo"⁸⁹ (III, 694). Absence of recorded beginning and end of existence points to the truth that Christ is eternal *a parte post* and *a parte ante*. Ἀφωμοιωμένος δὲ κτλ provides a rational basis for transfer of the preceding epithets about the ancient type (i.e., a non-Aaronic, non-perishable ministrant) to the Son of God or Messianic antitype. The positive declaration that Melchizedek "continues a priest for ever" was likely adduced from the oracle of the Psalmist. The fact that Melchizedek neither took up the priesthood from a predecessor nor handed it on to a successor points to the corresponding reality that Christ is the eternal, absolute and undying high priest of the New Covenant. How fitting, therefore, that the one who foreshadowed the Messiah in respect of (i) the interpretation of his name and title, (ii) the absence of Levitical pedigree and (iii) his eternal existence, should merit the epithaph: "Behold how great he is!" (vs. 4).⁹⁰

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⁸⁵ Ex. 28: 1; Numb. 3: 10; 18: 1.

⁸⁶ Lev. 21: 7, 13 ff.; Ezek. 44: 22.

⁸⁷ Ezra 2: 62; Neh. 7: 63.

⁸⁸ *Contra Apionem*, I. 7.

⁸⁹ Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar*, III, 694.

⁹⁰ Dr. Demarest's study, *A History of Interpretation of Hebrews 7, 1-10 from the Reformation to the Present*, has now been published as No. 19 in the series *Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese*, edited by O. Cullmann and others (Mohr, Tübingen, 1976). Ed.