

“Our hope and prayer is that these expositions will prove not only clarifying but humbling, enriching, and edifying, as well as incentives to keep preaching and teaching Old Testament texts.”

D. A. CARSON

THE BIBLE'S STORY LINE IS GRAND IN ITS SWEEP, beautiful in its form, and unified in its message. However, many of us still struggle both to understand and to best communicate how the Old and New Testaments fit together, especially in relation to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Eight prominent evangelical pastors and scholars demonstrate what it looks like to preach Christ from the Old Testament in this collection of expositions of various Old Testament texts:

- ALBERT MOHLER** — Studying the Scriptures and Finding Jesus (JOHN 5:31-47)
- TIM KELLER** — Getting Out (EXODUS 14)
- ALISTAIR BEGG** — From a Foreigner to King Jesus (RUTH)
- JAMES MACDONALD** — When You Don't Know What to Do (PSALM 25)
- CONRAD MBEWE** — The Righteous Branch (JEREMIAH 23:1-8)
- MATT CHANDLER** — Youth (ECCLESIASTES 11:9-12:8)
- MIKE BULLMORE** — God's Great Heart of Love toward His OWN (ZEPHANIAH)
- D. A. CARSON** — Getting Excited about Melchizedek (PSALM 110)

From the experience of the Israelites during the exodus, to the cryptic words about Melchizedek in the Psalms, here are 8 helpful examples of successful approaches to preaching the gospel from the Old Testament by some of the most skilled expositors of our day.

D. A. Carson (PhD, Cambridge University) is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, where he has taught since 1978. He is president of The Gospel Coalition and has written or edited nearly 60 books.

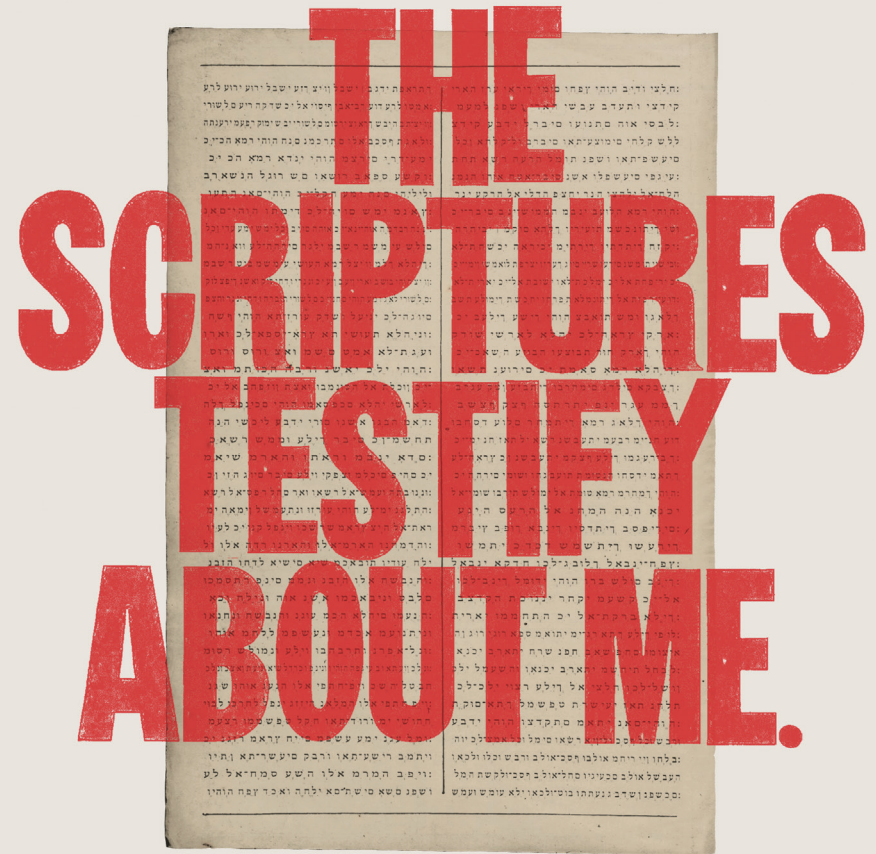
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THE SCRIPTURES TESTIFY ABOUT ME.

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**JESUS AND THE GOSPEL
IN THE
OLD TESTAMENT**

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THE SCRIPTURES TESTIFY ABOUT ME

*JESUS AND THE GOSPEL
IN THE
OLD TESTAMENT*

EDITED BY D. A. CARSON

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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THE SCRIPTURES TESTIFY ABOUT ME

PREFACE

The book you hold in your hands contains the written form of the plenary addresses given in April 2011 at the national conference of The Gospel Coalition, in Chicago. The audio and video forms of those addresses are still available on our website (thegospelcoalition.org).

The theme of that conference was “They Testify about Me: Preaching Jesus and the Gospel from the Old Testament.” Not a few of the accompanying workshops were tied, directly or indirectly, to the same theme. The conference title has been slightly modified to become the title of this book.

So as not to arouse false expectations, I should specify what these eight plenary addresses do *not* provide. They do not provide a “how to” resource for preachers: a manual on “how to read the Old Testament in the light of the New,” or something of that sort. The best “how to manual” along those lines is the book by G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation*. Still less does the book you are reading attempt to comment on every place where the New Testament quotes or alludes to the Old: that would require a very large tome, and one is already available: G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, which is meant to be a reference tool for preachers and other Bible teachers.

What the addresses in this book offer is something more modest but with more immediate effect, namely, some examples of Christian preachers handling a variety of highly diverse Old Testament texts. The exception is the first chapter, which ably in-

roduces the subject. The remaining seven focus squarely on Old Testament passages and bring the reader to Jesus and the gospel.

These seven expositions of Old Testament texts vary enormously as to how the Old Testament text is handled. In some cases the preacher focuses on the details of the text, and, because the text is demonstrably predictive, finds his way to Jesus in a straightforward fashion. In other cases the preacher relies on typology—on discerning the persons, places, and institutions that constitute massive patterns in the Old Testament that spin out into trajectories pointing forward to Jesus. In one or two cases, the preacher expounds the “big idea” of the assigned text and, in a kind of analogical argument, arrives at the same “big idea” in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Again, a preacher may show how the sequence of developing revelation in the Old Testament forces the reader toward the culmination of that sequence, Jesus himself.

In every case, our hope and prayer is that these expositions will prove not only clarifying but humbling, enriching, and edifying, as well as incentives to keep preaching and teaching Old Testament texts.

D. A. Carson

GETTING EXCITED ABOUT MELCHIZEDEK

Psalm 110

D. A. Carson

Hear the word of God, Psalm 110, the Old Testament chapter quoted most often in the New Testament:

Of David. A psalm.

The LORD says to my lord:

“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.”

The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying,

“Rule in the midst of your enemies!”

Your troops will be willing
on your day of battle.

Arrayed in holy splendor,
your young men will come to you
like dew from the morning’s womb.

The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind:

“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”

The Lord is at your right hand;
 he will crush kings on the day of his wrath.
 He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead
 and crushing the rulers of the whole earth.
 He will drink from a brook along the way,
 and so he will lift his head high.¹

Most of the controlling themes in the Bible do not resonate very well with the dominant secular culture of the West—and for that matter with many other cultures as well. Think through many of the controlling categories:

1. Covenant
2. Priest
3. Sacrifice
4. Blood offering
5. Passover
6. Messiah
7. King
8. Day of Atonement
9. Year of Jubilee

I guarantee you that there are not a lot of people on the streets of Chicago asking, “I wonder when the Year of Jubilee is coming.”

We speak of “King Jesus.” When Jesus began to minister, he did not announce the dawning of the Republic of God. The last king we had in America was King George III, and he didn’t turn out too well. If instead we come from a Commonwealth country and still nurture a lot of respect for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, nevertheless we recognize that she is a *constitutional* monarch; she has very little real power. But the king in the Bible is not a constitutional monarch. So even a notion that is common enough—like king—means something very different in our culture. It has different resonances.

Again, most people on the streets of Chicago are not thinking, “I hope my high priest is up-to-date on his repentance when he offers that blood sacrifice this year. I really feel the need for atone-

¹All Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the New International Version.

ment. I hope he does a good job in the Most Holy Place.” People in our world do not think in those terms at all. Of course, some exposure to priesthood is found among Roman Catholics and Episcopalians, but that is pretty far removed from Levitical priesthood or Melchizedekian priesthood.

Yet precisely because he is both king and priest, the figure of Melchizedek turns out to be one of the most instructive figures in the entire Bible for helping us put our Bibles together. He helps us see clearly who Jesus is.

This address is going to involve some hard mental work, but God has put these things together in the Bible in this way not only for our instruction but also for our good.

Melchizedek shows up only two times in the Old Testament: once in Genesis 14 and then again in Psalm 110. Then he shows up in only one book in the New Testament: Hebrews. Yet he turns out to be utterly revolutionary in opening our eyes to the glories of our Savior.

PSALM 110

We begin with Psalm 110. Here we must ask two questions. The first may sound a little out of place.

WHO WROTE PSALM 110?

You may think, “Don, for goodness’ sakes, stay out of the classroom.” In the classroom you discuss a lot of things about who wrote what and when and why. We burden our students with these things, and they have to pass exams on them. “Just get us to the text,” some may mutter. Certainly in some instances, it doesn’t make a lot of difference who wrote what. But in this instance it makes a huge difference, so we must ask and answer the question, Who wrote this Psalm?

In most of our English Bibles, there is a superscription before the psalm that occurs after the bold-faced title **Psalm 110** and prior to verse 1. It may occur in italics and a smaller font, *Of David. A psalm*, or something of that order. But there are many contemporary

commentators who do not think that David wrote this psalm. They think that such superscriptions were introduced to the psalms later.

Suppose that David did not write this psalm. How would you read it?

The LORD says to my lord:

“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.” (v. 1)

If David did not write it, it sounds as if “the LORD” (i.e., Yahweh)—the living, covenant God—is speaking to, apparently, “my lord” the king (i.e., the king of Israel). So the author of the psalm would not be the king of Israel but a courtier—someone in the king’s court. Many psalms appear to be written by a courtier. So if we get rid of the superscription, then a courtier wrote this psalm. In that case, this psalm sounds a lot like Psalm 2 and others that are royal and Davidic and promise conquest over the enemies.

But the superscription will not go away. Of the various manuscripts that have come down to us, not one leaves it out. In our printed Bibles, we have a little font for “Of David. A psalm” or something similar; we have a bigger font for “Psalm 110.” But of course, they did not have distinctive fonts in the days before printing presses. What is remarkable is that in all the manuscripts that have come down to us, this superscription is part of the psalm. It is not an add-on that was introduced later; it was counted as part of the psalm.

But if these arguments were not enough, in this instance we rely on the words of the Lord Jesus himself. For the validity of one of Christ’s arguments turns on the Davidic authorship of this psalm (Matt. 22:44–45; Mark 12:36–37).

While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, “Why do the teachers of the law say that the Messiah is the son of David? David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared:

“The Lord said to my Lord:
 “Sit at my right hand
 until I put your enemies
 under your feet.”

David himself calls him ‘Lord.’ How then can he be his son?”

The large crowd listened to him with delight. (Mark 12:35–37)

The point is that if David the king has written this (i.e., the writer is not a courtier addressing the king), then to whom does “my Lord” refer? It can’t be David because he is not talking about himself. So Jesus draws the conclusion that David must be talking to someone who is greater than David himself. But to whom does King David say “my Lord”—apart from Yahweh himself? Therefore, this must be the anticipated Messiah. And Jesus himself takes it that way.

Jesus essentially says, “You are used to thinking of the Messiah as the son of David. And in one sense, of course, he *is* the son of David.” But if the Messiah is *merely* the son of David, then in the order of thinking of the day, that would make the Messiah ultimately inferior to David. We do not understand that well in the West because we think that the really important people are the young people. But in many cultures of the world, the really important people are the older people. So I am always of less honor than my father, who is of less honor than his father, who is of less honor than his father, and so on. That means that David’s son cannot be greater than David; he must be inferior. If you think of Jesus as David’s son and nothing more, your Jesus is too small. For David himself anticipates this person coming by speaking of him as “my Lord.” He says, “The Lord [i.e., Yahweh] said to my Lord [i.e., the Messiah]”: he is picturing messiahship that escapes mere sonship to David, as important as that sonship is in fulfilling the promise of the Davidic line to conceive of a Messiah who, though David’s son, is also David’s Lord.

So this psalm is talking about the Messiah, about the one who was to come, about Jesus. David wrote it about a thousand years before Christ. That date, as we’ll see, is important.

WHAT DOES PSALM 110 SAY?

The second question we must ask is, What does this psalm say? If you look at it closely, it is divided into two oracles, and commentary follows each oracle.

Oracle 1 = verse 1

Commentary = verses 2-3

Oracle 2 = verse 4

Commentary = verses 5-7

Oracle 1 (Ps. 110:1)

“The LORD says to my lord” (v. 1). The exact words pick up an expression that is very common in the prophets, especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Directly rendered, it reads, “Yahweh’s utterance to my lord.” This is a very common prophetic declaration. This is a way of saying that David here functions as a prophet. David declares what God is declaring to the one David himself refers to as “my lord.” And David says that Yahweh says to him,

Sit at my right hand
 until I make your enemies
 a footstool for your feet. (v. 1)

Do you have any idea how often the New Testament quotes or alludes to that little expression “Sit at my right hand”? It comes up again and again. Below are some of the inferences that New Testament writers draw from this little expression. In them Yahweh, the great covenant God, is addressing the Messiah. What do we infer from this?

1. He is greater than David. “For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said . . .” (Acts 2:34).
2. He is greater than angels. “To which of the angels did God ever say . . . ?” (Heb. 1:13). There is no other mediating person who sits at the right hand of God.

3. He is exalted to God's side. As one author has put it, "God exalted him as emphatically as man rejected him." "God exalted him to his own right hand" (Acts 5:30-31).
4. His session (i.e., his being seated at God's right hand) grounds his intercession for us. "Christ Jesus . . . is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us" (Rom. 8:34; cf. Acts 5:31).
5. His session signals the completion of his sacrifice. "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest [i.e., Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God" (Heb. 10:11-12). It signals that Jesus's cross-work is utterly finished. The sacrifice of Jesus does not have to be repeated.
6. He awaits the ultimate conquest and surrender of his enemies. "He sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool" (Heb. 10:12-13).

These are six theological inferences about the Messiah that are drawn from this one little phrase in Psalm 110:1: "Sit at my right hand."

The words "until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet" envisage the Messiah's conquest, his active, controlling confrontation of the enemy. And God himself is going to do it now that the sacrifice has been paid.

Commentary (Ps. 110:2-3)

All of God's people will be so transformed that they will serve willingly in the Messiah's army:

The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion, saying,
"Rule in the midst of your enemies!" (v. 2)

This is an astonishing passage. It is not saying simply that God confronts the enemies all by himself. Somehow he is calling together the Messiah's army and making them willing to do his bidding. This anticipates the transformation that comes in the gospel.

Your troops will be willing
on your day of battle. (v. 3)

God's people become willing on the day of his battle. When he wants to use them, he makes them willing; he transforms them.² This tells us something about the strange nature of this army and this military service. The same sort of overtone occurs in a different context—a more military context—in Judges 5:2:

When the princes in Israel take the lead,
when the people willingly offer themselves—
praise the LORD!

So here in Judges we have a picture of the rulers of Israel operating in justice and taking the lead against the enemies, and the people willingly follow them. In Psalm 110, the Messiah—at God's right hand—displays his power and so transforms his people that they willingly follow him and constitute the Lord's army and push the enemies back. That is the vision.

That last half of verse 3 can be translated in several different ways. I won't go through the options here. But it sounds to me as if this envisages a splendid army of the young arising freshly, silently, and in holy splendor to do their Master's bidding:

Arrayed in holy splendor,
your young men will come to you
like dew from the morning's womb. (v. 3)

Oracle 2 (Ps. 110:4)

The second oracle still addresses the Messiah.

The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind:
“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.” (v. 4)

²That is part of what we mean, is it not, by regeneration and conversion, so that our hearts now want to do his bidding when at one time we wanted to do only our own.

We will return to this verse, but on first reading it is staggeringly out of place. After all, according to the law of Moses, which had been given some centuries earlier, a priest could not be a king, and a king could not be a priest. God himself destroyed the first king of the united monarchy, Saul, because Saul tried to mingle those two roles. David certainly understood that. So what is David doing here envisaging a Messiah who is transparently the king—the king from Jerusalem, the king from David’s line—now being a priest, regardless of the order? It really does seem very strange.

And what is Melchizedek doing here? What is going on in David’s mind as he writes this? We will come back to this in a moment, but look first at the commentary that follows.

Commentary (Ps. 110:5-7)

Verses 5-7 give you another surprise. Once you have seen the two oracles and the first commentary, then you expect a pattern:

Oracle 1 (v. 1) about the king

Commentary (vv. 2-3) about the king’s rule

Oracle 2 (v. 4) about the priest

Commentary (vv. 5-7) about the priesthood

But verses 5-7 are not about the priesthood. They are more a commentary on the king’s rule.

The Lord is at your right hand;

he will crush kings on the day of his wrath.

He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead
and crushing the rulers of the whole earth.

He will drink from a brook along the way,
and so he will lift his head high.

This is the domain of the king: ruling, confrontation, war. The enthronement of the priest-king—his session at the right hand of God—is therefore not the final setting but the prelude to world conquest.

Now Yahweh and his Messiah act as one. On the one hand,

The Lord is at your right hand;
 he will crush kings on the day of his wrath.
 He will judge the nations. (vv. 5–6)

On the other hand, he is this human figure who

will drink from a brook along the way,
 and so he will lift his head high. (v. 7)

Here is God bringing about conquest but somehow doing it through this human figure who takes a drink along the way.

Do you know what the closest New Testament language to this passage is? Revelation, especially chapter 19. For here you have moved from Hebrews and Melchizedek to the apocalypse and destruction.

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. “He will rule them with an iron scepter.” He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. (Rev. 19:11–16)

We have moved from the Melchizedekian vision of a priest in Hebrews to ultimate consummation in conquest and judgment.

But that makes Psalm 110:4 (the second oracle) all the stranger because not only does this psalm mingle priest and king, but even after introducing the priest—which seems strange enough—it does not comment on it.

WHAT IS DAVID THINKING?

So what is going on in David's head? What is he thinking about? I've thought about that one for a long time, and for a long time I think I got it wrong.

Modes of Inspiration

Inspiration in the Bible is by many modes. Sometimes it's by direct dictation. For example, God gives the words to Jeremiah; Jeremiah dictates them to Baruch; Baruch writes them down. That's why when the enemies come along and destroy the scroll that Baruch has written, the reader is supposed to laugh. The content in the scroll, after all, came from God. Do you really think God has forgotten it? Baruch might not be able to reproduce it, and Jeremiah may have forgotten a few lines here and there. But *God* dictated it. God's memory disks can never be wiped clean. So when the enemy destroys the scroll, God simply gives the words again to Jeremiah, who again dictates them to Baruch, who again writes them down. The only person who comes out somewhat disadvantaged on this one is Baruch because he has to write it all down again. But God is not going to forget the words of God.

Here, then, is inspiration by direct dictation.

Sometimes inspiration is by vision and word that the human agent himself does not even understand. Daniel, for example, asks what one of his visions means, and God essentially says, "Frankly, Daniel, it's none of your business. Seal up the book. It'll get sorted out later." Daniel is a transcriber, a witness, but he doesn't understand what he says, and the text says so.

Consider another mode of inspiration. You are not supposed to think of David coming in one night from a long session with his court counselors and saying, "Phew. Time to go to bed. This has been a tough day." So he stretches out, and then a voice says to him, "Not yet, David. I've got a psalm for you to write. Take out your quill pen." And David takes out his quill pen.

"All ready, David?"

“Ready.”

“The Lord . . .”

“T-h-e L-o-r-d . . .”

“. . . is my shepherd.”

“. . . i-s m-y s-h-e-p-h-e-r-d.”

“I shall not want.”

“I s-h-a-l-l n-o-t w-a-n-t.”

There’s no way that David wrote Psalm 23 that way. He wrote out of the fullness of his heart and the richness of his own experience. He wrote out of the overflow of creativity and his knowledge of the living God and his own background in the shepherd fields around Bethlehem. But borne along by the Spirit of God, so superintended by God’s sovereignty, the words that came out are simultaneously David’s words and the words of God.

That’s another mode of inspiration. And we could mention several others.

So what is going on here in Psalm 110? Was David writing down these words because they were given by God, even though he himself did not understand them? If so, perhaps he was thinking, “I don’t have a clue what verse 4 means, but it’s going down.” That’s possible; after all, that is what Daniel experienced. For a long time I thought that was the most plausible way of imagining what was going on in David’s head as he wrote verse 4. I just couldn’t figure out how to read verse 4 in such a way that David could actually be making sense of it. So I thought, “This can’t be a Psalm 23 sort of experience. It must be more of a Daniel mode of inspiration.” Of course, this passage is not in an apocalyptic framework, like Daniel. Still, for a long time I thought that this was one of those relatively rare places in the Bible where it seems the human author didn’t have a clue about what was going on.

But I’ve changed my mind. I think David got this in very substantial measure out of his devotions. His devotions? Yes, of course. After all, Deuteronomy 17 says what the king is supposed to do when he comes to power:

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. (Deut. 17:18–20)

The king was supposed to copy out the book of the law and make a nice clean copy. (There were no photocopy machines in those days.) That clean copy was supposed to be his reading copy, which he was then to read every day for the rest of his life so that he would “not turn from the law to the right or to the left” but know the Lord his God, please him, and not think of himself too highly. Although many kings did not do this, David at his best was certainly doing this. Some of the kings were probably semi-literate, but David was the sweet psalmist of Israel. He had a decent education behind him. So doubtless David was having his devotions out of the Word of God.

Now put yourself in David’s place. He begins his reign in Hebron in the south, ruling over the southern two tribes. After seven years, he captures Jerusalem and becomes king over the twelve tribes. So he moves to *Jerusalem*. Second Samuel 6 says that once he is in Jerusalem, the tabernacle is moved to Jerusalem—and then 2 Samuel 7 establishes the Davidic dynasty. Do you hear that concatenation of things? The tabernacle, and thus the entire priestly system, is in Jerusalem—for the first time in the same place as the king: Jerusalem, the city of the king, the city of the high priest.

So now imagine David having his devotions, and one day he comes to Genesis 14.

Genesis 14

Melchizedek first appears in Genesis 14. Let me remind you of the context. There were four “kings.” By “kings,” you are not supposed to think of Charles III but instead something like a small-

town mayor. A lot of so-called “cities” in the ancient world had only 5,000 people; a big one was 10,000 or 15,000. Only the really big ones got to 200,000. So these are small-town mayors. They are “kings” of small communities. They are the commanders of little “armies” that are, in effect, raiding parties. Four of these get together under Kedorlaomer, and together they go on raids, gradually extending their reach. Eventually, they move farther south until they come into the area where Abram lives, and they attack the king of Sodom.

Sodom is allied with Gomorrah and three others, so now there are five kings against the four attacking kings. There is a nasty battle, and the four kings under Kedorlaomer win. They steal the women and children and cattle, kill as many of the men as possible, and take off toward the north.

“A man who had escaped came and reported this to Abram the Hebrew. Now Abram was living near the great trees of Mamre the Amorite, a brother of Eshkol and Aner, all of whom were allied with Abram” (Gen. 14:13). So now Abram and these other three allies go after the raiding party.

When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and went in pursuit as far as Dan. During the night Abram divided his men to attack them and he routed them, pursuing them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus. He recovered all the goods and brought back his relative Lot and his possessions, together with the women and the other people. (vv. 14–16)

“Trained men” does not mean that they are trained with rocket-propelled grenades or the latest in martial arts. I have a son who is a Marine trained in the martial arts and in I don’t know how many weapons. I punched him in the shoulder a few years ago, and he put his big arm around me and said, rather kindly, “Dad, do you have any idea how many ways I could kill you with my bare hands?” I don’t punch him in the shoulder anymore. The “trained men” in Genesis 14:14 are not trained in *that* sense. They

are fit. They can do some stick fighting, maybe have the odd sword and many knives. But they take off after the four attacking kings, increasing their own numbers with whatever men come from the other three allies.

They pursue the others “as far as Dan.” That is something like 120–130 miles to the north, all on foot. They attack the enemies during the night and pursue them north of Damascus—an additional sixty miles or so north. That’s the way a lot of those fights went. It’s not that they drew battle lines like in World War I and lobbed howitzer shells at each other. There would be a big clash, and when one side started losing, they’d start to run. The other side would then chase them.

As Abram’s group chases the fleeing raiding party, they pick up stolen people and goods that the raiding party is leaving behind. They keep pursuing the enemy until they’re really not a threat anymore and the pursuers have collected all that they’re going to collect. And then they start the long trek back.

After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King’s Valley). . . .

The king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself.” (vv. 17, 21)

The king of Sodom is not being generous here; he’s merely following the custom of the day: that is, the reward for these mercenary groups would be the booty. They would return the stolen people and keep the stolen booty. Abram has every right to keep the booty.

But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “With raised hand I have sworn an oath to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the strap of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, ‘I made Abram rich.’ I will accept nothing but what my men have eaten and the share that belongs to the men who went with

me—to Aner, Eshkol and Mamre. Let them have their share.”
(vv. 22–24)

If you skip verses 18–20, the account is entirely coherent. We don’t need those verses to make sense of the narrative. Just as the mention of Melchizedek in Psalm 110 seems anomalous (What’s it doing there?), the mention of Melchizedek in Genesis 14:18–20 is anomalous (What’s it doing here?). But not only is it there; it actually breaks up the account of the interchange between Sodom and Abram.

Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine.
He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth.
And praise be to God Most High,
who delivered your enemies into your hand.”

Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything. (vv. 18–20)

Now what should we learn from this? From the immediate context, Melchizedek clearly is a foil to Sodom. Abraham won’t have anything to do with Sodom; he doesn’t want anything from Sodom and won’t give anything to him. There is a coldness between Abram and Sodom. Sodom represents the wickedness of the valley. But Melchizedek is a man of another order. His name itself is significant (as names so often are in the Old Testament). It means, quite literally, “king of righteousness.” (The *Melch*-root means “king,” and *zedek* means “righteousness.”) He is the king whose name means “king of righteousness”: Your Majesty, King of Righteousness.

At the same time, he rules over Salem (v. 18). He is the king of Salem. In Hebrew, you work by the consonants: *s-l-m*. Those are the same consonants as *shalom*. In one context *shalom* can mean simply “hi.” But more richly, *shalom* refers to well-being—well-being with God, well-being with human beings, well-being in

the richest sense of human flourishing. But undoubtedly this is the town of Salem. There were many towns called Salem in the ancient Near East; it was a pretty common name. The chances are very high, however, that since this is the area in which Abram is living at the time, the Salem in question refers to *Jerusalem*. Apparently, Melchizedek is king of Jerusalem, though we cannot be certain.

Salem means “peace.” So Melchizedek is king of a town called Peace, while his name means “king of righteousness.”

He brings out “bread and wine.” This is the only detail in these three verses that the New Testament does not pick up. The New Testament does not find, for example, eucharistic symbolism here. Bread was a staple of the time, and wine was a common table drink (it was cut with water between three parts to one and ten parts to one). These poor chaps are famished; they’re hungry and thirsty after their long trek back. Melchizedek meets them with huge quantities of supplies so that he is able to provide food and nourishment for these troops who have returned with the booty.

“He was priest of God Most High.” When Abram speaks of God, he says, “With raised hand I have sworn an oath to the LORD [the covenant name for God], God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth” (v. 22). “God Most High” is a title for God used in connection with both Abram and Melchizedek, but another expression Abram uses (“the LORD [the covenant name for God]”) is not associated with Melchizedek.

“He blessed Abram, saying, ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth,’” which is exactly what Abram picks up when he speaks about God in verse 22.

Melchizedek continues, “And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.” Abraham does not succeed, in the last analysis, because of his military prowess and the fitness of his 318 men. This is the work of God.

“Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.”

That’s all the text says. But if you’re a good reader, you have to start scratching your head and saying, “Okay, restricting ourselves

to this text in Genesis, what's going on here? This is really strange. It breaks up the account. What are verses 18–20 contributing?" Indeed, this passage in Genesis is strange for another reason. In Genesis, everybody who is anybody is connected genealogically to other people. For example, read Genesis 5:

When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth. After Seth was born, Adam lived 800 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Adam lived a total of 930 years, and then he died.

When Seth had lived 105 years, he became the father of Enosh. After he became the father of Enosh, Seth lived 807 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Seth lived a total of 912 years, and then he died. (Gen. 5:3–8)

Or alternatively, Genesis identifies people as “the son of” specific people.

But Melchizedek pops up, disappears, and there's no mention of a mommy or a daddy, and no genealogy. There are a few others in the book of Genesis without any mention of their genealogy, but at least they have the decency not to be important so that they don't raise any questions. But Melchizedek is so important that Abram actually pays him a tithe and receives a blessing from him. Abram himself—wealthy farmer and impressive figure that he is—receives a blessing from Melchizedek. Abram recognizes him as his superior.

Two Historic Interpretations of Melchizedek

So what is going on? In the history of the church, there have been two explanations for the figure of Melchizedek.

One is that Melchizedek is a pre-incarnate visitation of Jesus. That is, before Jesus becomes the God-man Jesus of Nazareth, the eternal Son appears in bodily form—an incarnation before the incarnation. On this view, the eternal Son of God presents himself explicitly in human form in this Old Testament passage.

Many Christians think that that is what's going on here. If you

hold that view, I will not attack it. In fact, nothing in my argument in the rest of this address depends on saying that this view is wrong. But I think it is wrong.

For a start, there is no hint that Melchizedek is a divine figure. Interestingly, Melchizedek does not use the name Yahweh. More importantly, why should we think that Abram was the only person in the entire ancient Near East who believed that there is only one God? We are not that far removed from Babel and the judgment of the flood. There must be some public memory here. Clearly there were many pagan kings around. But why shouldn't there be a king or two who acknowledged God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth? In that case, Abram may well have found in him a rather sympathetic figure. He may have become more intimately tied with him than he was with Mamre, Eshkol, and Aner. So when Abram receives some supplies from Melchizedek, Abram pays him due homage.

The passage remains strange because it says so little about this Melchizedek. But there are two other passages that make me think Melchizedek is unlikely to be a pre-incarnate presentation of Jesus (although we will see that he points to Jesus). One is found in Psalm 110; the other is found in Hebrews 7, and we'll consider it in a moment. For now, focus again on Psalm 110. If Genesis 14:18–20 really does report an incarnation of the second person of the Godhead, then Psalm 110:4 is almost incomprehensible.

The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind:
“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”

Why does Psalm 110 say, “*in the order of Melchizedek*”? Why not say that “the LORD” *is* Melchizedek? Why not say, “You are a priest forever. You are indeed Melchizedek”? That would solve the problem. But instead he is a priest *in the order of Melchizedek*. Melchizedek is a model.

So what is going on in David's head? Don't forget: Just a few years earlier, David succeeded Saul, and he knows that Saul was killed and his line of succession destroyed because he had tried to be a priest-king. David is not going to make that mistake. So now David is having his devotions, and he reads Genesis 14 and discovers that there is a remarkable priest-king after all. There can't be anything intrinsically wicked about being a priest-king because even Abram recognized Melchizedek as the priest-king, paid him homage, and received blessings from him. David knows that he can't be a priest-king, but there can't be anything *intrinsically* wicked about it. David knows that Abraham lived about 2000 BC (not that he'd use that number or "BC" in those days) and that the law came about five hundred years in between Abraham and David. The law established the principle, "You cannot simultaneously be priest and king. The prohibition is absolute." But that law was not around, of course, when Abraham was alive, even if that law is now absolute in David's day. But David can't help thinking, as he's having his devotions, that maybe someday we'll have a priest-king again because Melchizedek is an enigmatic figure *superior to Abraham*—Abraham the progenitor of the entire covenantal race—who is priest-king. Melchizedek is the priest-king of God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth.

And by whatever insight beyond that, the Holy Spirit carries David along, and David picks up his pen and writes,

The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind:
"You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek."

Psalm 110 is about a priest-king. His priesthood is not in the order of Levi, for that would be against the law. When Saul flouted that law, he was punished. And yet, a priest, a priest-king in the order of Melchizedek? That, surely, is possible. That is what Psalm 110 announces.

Psalm 110 hangs there for another thousand years. It just hangs there, waiting.

HEBREWS 7

Melchizedek is mentioned elsewhere in Hebrews, but we will focus on Hebrews 7. The book of Hebrews is often said to distort the Old Testament when it quotes it; allegedly, it twists things around and gets them wrong. But listen carefully to what the text says, and you discover that the writer is engaged in serious exegesis. He is reading what is there in the text: “This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything” (Heb. 7:1–2a). That summarizes Genesis 14. Now the exegesis comes. The author of Hebrews thinks that the meaning of the Hebrew name Melchizedek is theologically significant:

First, the name Melchizedek means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace.” Without father or mother [so far as the text goes], without genealogy [that’s the point], without beginning of days or end of life [so far as the text goes], resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. (Heb. 7:2b–3)

If Melchizedek really *is* “the Son of God,” then the reason “he remains a priest forever” is that he *is* the eternal son of God. But the author of Hebrews is saying something different. Melchizedek, he asserts, resembles the Son of God; he is *like* the Son of God. This conclusion he grounds in the observation that there is theological weight *in what is left out*: there is no mention of mother or father or genealogy or death. Of course, arguments from silence can be very weak. But an argument from silence is very strong if you are expecting noise. Read Sherlock Holmes’s “The Dog That Barked in the Night.” The point is that the dog *didn’t* bark in the night. This dog always barked when there was a stranger around. Somebody

came and did something in the house, and the dog didn't bark. The silence was significant because the dog always barked at strangers. Therefore, it had to be someone who wasn't a stranger to the dog.

Whether or not there is a genealogy is insignificant in some contexts. But if everyone who is significant in the book of Genesis does have a genealogy, it's significant when suddenly someone is introduced who *doesn't* have a genealogy. You must draw some inferences. The author of Hebrews is saying, "As God has given us this account, there is weight to the fact that Melchizedek is not said to have a father or mother—no genealogy. As far as the record goes, it doesn't list his birth or death." Earlier in Genesis, there are lots of beginnings and deaths. But Melchizedek simply shows up and disappears. Thus, Melchizedek is *like* an eternal priest who lives forever.

So I don't think it's necessary to argue that Melchizedek is a pre-incarnate appearance of the eternal Son. Instead, this is an example of what we often see in the Old Testament: patterns, institutions, and people put in place with all kinds of symbol-laden structures around them that point forward until you come to the reality itself.

Notice further the exegesis of Hebrews:

Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! Now the law [i.e., the law of Moses, which comes more than half a millennium *after* Abraham] requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people—that is, from their fellow Israelites—even though they also are descended from Abraham. [I.e., the law authorized the Levites, the ultimate grandchildren of Abraham, to collect tithes.] This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater. (Heb. 7:4–7)

All of this argumentation shows just how important Melchizedek is. All of the argument is straightforward exegesis.

Then we come to a big jump. When we start talking about how to preach Christ from the Old Testament, one of the ways into that discussion is to examine how the New Testament quotes the Old. So you start from the back end and see how the New Testament quotes the Old. You discover that it does so in a huge diversity of ways: sometimes by analogy, sometimes by direct prediction, sometimes in word-association games, sometimes appealing to common theological themes, sometimes by something we call typology. With typology, there is a pattern: an institution or person, place, thing gets repeated and repeated and ratcheted up until you expect there to be something bigger that brings the pattern to a climax.

This typology introduces an additional factor. That factor shows up half a dozen times in the Bible and is hinted at in other places. But this way of quoting the Old Testament is spectacularly insightful. I'm going to get at this one through the side door.

If you were a conservative first-century Jew and you were asked, "How do you please God?" how would you answer? You would answer, I think, by saying, "By obeying the law."

"How did Daniel please God?"

"He obeyed the law."

"How did David please God?"

"He obeyed the law."

"How did Isaiah please God?"

"He obeyed the law."

"How did Abraham please God?"

"He obeyed the law."

"Oh—wait a minute. Abraham didn't have the law. He lived before the law.

"But the text says, 'Abraham obeyed me and did everything I required of him, keeping my commands, my decrees and my instructions' (Gen. 26:5). He must have had a private revelation of the law."

"How did Enoch please God?"

“He obeyed the law.”

“Wait a minute. Enoch was only seventh from Adam. He didn’t have the law. Neither Abraham nor Moses even existed yet. That’s desperately anachronistic.”

“Yes, but the text says, ‘Enoch walked faithfully with God’ (Gen. 5:24). That is common language after the giving of the law for obeying the law. So undoubtedly for Enoch to obey God, he had to obey the law. He too must have been given a private revelation of the law, which he then kept.”

Now what are you doing by this kind of reading of the Old Testament? You are elevating the law to be the hermeneutical control over the entire text. So you have taken away the steps of progress in history, and all you have instead is the law controlling how you read the entire narrative.

Then you come to the New Testament writers. Paul almost certainly would have interpreted the Old Testament account the way I have just described *before he became a Christian*. But now he is a Christian. And when Paul becomes a Christian, he sees that when he reads the Old Testament, *sequence* is important. Read Galatians 3: God gave his promise to Abraham *before* he gave the law, and the law can’t annul the promise. Abraham was justified by faith *before* the giving of the law. That is a grounding that is established before the law comes. That is a *sequential* reading of the Old Testament. First-century conservative Palestinian Jews didn’t read the text that way. But the *sequence* is really important for Paul to authorize that the gospel saves people by faith.

Now you see something of the same sort here in Hebrews 7. Look at the argument: “If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood [that came through the law] . . . why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?” (Heb. 7:11). If the ultimate priesthood was the Levitical priesthood and the law of Moses was final, then why on earth is David saying what he says in Psalm 110 centuries after the law was given? By announcing a priest in

the order of Melchizedek, David implicitly says that the Levitical priesthood somehow isn't good enough. It must be eclipsed. So one thousand years before Jesus comes, already David's psalm says, in effect, "We must have more than a Levitical priesthood. It's not enough." David implicitly announces the need for a priesthood that outstrips the Levitical priesthood prescribed by the law of Moses.

Then watch how the argument goes: "For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also" (Heb. 7:12). Go back to that little parenthetical bit that I let out in verse 11: "If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?" The law and the priesthood are so tied together (one establishes the other) that if you take one away, then the other one is gone too.

Sometimes we think of the law as divided into three categories: moral, civil, and ceremonial. That's a common breakdown, and it has many kinds of utilitarian value. As a result, however, we tend to say, "The civil law is not all that important, and the ceremonial law is not all that important. The moral law is the really important thing." The result is that we love to meditate on Exodus 20 because it has the Ten Commandments, and then we sort of skim through Leviticus without much thought because so much of it is devoted to ceremonial law—and ceremonial law is what establishes the Levitical priesthood. But Hebrews 7 says that if you pull that priesthood out, then you change the entire law covenant. The entire law covenant is in principle obsolete as soon as you start announcing that the Levitical priesthood is obsolete. If one is obsolete, so is the other.

The entire argument is grounded in sequence:

1. Abraham encounters this vague figure Melchizedek. This happens before God gives the law. Melchizedek is a priest-king.
2. More than half a millennium later, the law says the same person cannot be both priest and king.

3. Centuries later, David says that there will be a priest-king in the order of Melchizedek. Thus, David makes the law, in principle, obsolete. This announces a new covenant in principle one thousand years before the coming of Jesus.
4. The author of Hebrews says that we now have a priest-king—not from the tribe of Levi (that would be illegitimate) but from the tribe of Judah. Thus, the entire law covenant is in some sense obsolete.

“He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar” (Heb. 7:13). That’s Jesus, who came from the tribe of Judah. The next verses explain:

For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. (vv. 14–16)

“A regulation as to his ancestry”—that’s what the *Levites* enjoyed. They had to have the right mother and father; they had to go back through Zadok all the way to Aaron; this was a regulation as to their ancestry.

But there is no ancestry to the historical figure Melchizedek. And Jesus’s ancestry according to the flesh is—Joseph? While Jesus is the son of Mary, his ultimate ancestry is grounded in the God of eternity: without father, without mother.

For it is declared,

“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.” (v. 17)

This cites Psalm 110. Hebrews continues:

The former regulation [i.e., the regulation about Levitical priests] is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law

made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath [i.e., priests in the Levitical system did not take oaths when they became priests], but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him:

“The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind:
‘You are a priest forever.’”

Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant. (Heb. 7:18–22)

Then the author of Hebrews spells out pastoral implications:

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. (vv. 23–25)

CONCLUSION

I have spent an undue amount of time explaining how these passages work because I want you to see that the New Testament authors are reading the Old Testament carefully. The New Testament authors observe the historical sequence in order to draw inferences that cannot easily be refuted. If you announce the coming of a priest-king (a) after God himself has said in his law covenant that there must not be a priest-king and (b) on the basis of a figure who shows up before that law covenant, then you are saying that the law covenant that forbids a priest-king is temporary and obsolete.

That means that the One we are looking for is not only the Davidic Messiah, the kingly ruler. He is also the priest. We must learn to see, understand, admire, and follow the traces of the wisdom of God in putting together the whole canon in these long trajectories that bring us along axis after axis to Jesus.

I just followed *one* axis that appears in only three passages. But you can follow similar trajectories regarding the temple, Passover, Yom Kippur, Sabbath and rest, the Day of Jubilee, the twelve tribes, the city of Jerusalem, and much more. You can track out all of these lines. Work hard at understanding how the New Testament handles the Old Testament, and you will learn how to preach the Old Testament, because these New Testament passages show the trajectories that God himself has put in place. And they point forward and bring us to Jesus. I say this to give you confidence to read the Word of God carefully, to listen to it, probe it, and discover for yourself how the New Testament writers themselves read the Old Testament. Then go and do likewise.

I want to end with one more observation. I have focused a disproportionate amount of time on the mechanics of these texts, how they are tied together. But you must see the theological payoff. We have a Savior who not only is the *king*—the promised king, who rules over our lives, who confronts the enemies of God, and who consummates all things—but also is the promised priest. Yes, Jesus is the king and conqueror, and we must bow in submission to his kingdom. But he is also the *priest* in the order of Melchizedek.

If Jesus is just a king, then we live in terror. But he is also the priest. He is the perfect Mediator between God and human beings because he is God and a human being. He exactly takes up all the functions and purposes of the Old Testament priests, but he outstrips them in one huge particular: he never sinned. The author of Hebrews goes on to talk about that. That is why Jesus is an even *better* high priest than they were.

Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men in all their

weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever. (Heb. 7:26–28)

Moreover, they offered inferior sacrifices. Does the blood of a bull and goat actually have some sort of intrinsic moral value? Does that make sense? The bullock is not saying, “Here’s my throat. Go ahead and slit it. I’m dying for you.” In that sense, it is a morally useless sacrifice. What does it mean to take the blood of a goat and substitute it for the blood of a human being? It doesn’t make sense. It is pointing forward to something else: the Lamb of God.

Wonderful, merciful Savior,
Precious Redeemer and Friend,
Who would have thought that a lamb
Could ransom the souls of men?³

And what a Lamb this One is. He is the priest, and he turns out to be the sacrifice. And he is the temple, the place where human beings meet the holy God. He is the temple, priest, and lamb, and his body is the veil. Again and again he takes all these strands to himself. We come to the New Testament text, and our eyes see how the Old Testament patterns in God’s perfect wisdom have anticipated all this. We see the fulfillment, and we bow and worship.

God knows that I need a king to subdue me and to bring in the consummation. I need a priest to offer up himself as the supreme sacrifice, or I am undone. I need a perfect priest—one of our kind, a human being, who is nevertheless one with God, without mother and without father (in the most ultimate sense), with everlasting days.

This is the Jesus of the gospel we proclaim.

Before the throne of God above,
I have a strong and perfect plea,
A great high priest whose name is love,
Who ever lives and pleads for me.⁴

³“Wonderful, Merciful Savior,” Dawn Rodgers and Eric Wyse, copyright © 1989 Word Music.

⁴Charitie Lees Smith, “The Advocate,” 1863.

Oh, Lord God, we do not want to make the reading of the Old Testament a merely cerebral exercise, but we do want to understand what your Word says, that we may draw near in confidence to Christ Jesus, our beloved king, our priest, made for us everything we need, such that we find full confidence in him. Open our eyes that we may see, and in seeing believe, and in believing obey; for Jesus's sake. Amen.