

Psalm 110, Jesus, and Melchizedek

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ABSTRACT: Jesus’s interpretation of Psalm 110:1 (Matt 22:42–46) was the standard interpretation in the first century, as the Pharisees’ response shows, and as other ancient texts attest. Jesus sees three people in verse 1: David (the speaking psalmist), YHVH (who promises), and the Messiah (who is addressed). Further, Psalm 110:4 must be read with Melchizedek as a vocative. That gives three people in verse 4: David (the speaking psalmist), YHVH (who promises), and Melchizedek (who is addressed). I conclude that Jesus was telling the Pharisees that Melchizedek is the Messiah, and that it was as Melchizedek that Jesus was seen by Abraham (John 8:56–58).

I have pondered Psalm 110 for decades.¹ The New Testament cites it more than any other Hebrew scripture—fourteen direct citations and many more allusions. It was important to Jesus. He cited it to the Pharisees and alluded to it at his trial. But, like the holy mountain, it is riddled with enigmas, terse, profound, and mysterious. I believe its implications are deeper than are commonly understood.

Who’s Who in Psalm 110:1

In Psalm 110, the Holy One promises eternal priesthood and universal dominion to someone. The question is “To whom?” Any answer faces a host of interpretational challenges, but the biggest ones are: “Who’s who in Psalm 110:1?” and “Who’s who in Psalm 110:4?” Let’s begin with the first verse.

A psalm of David.

YHVH says to my lord,

“Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.”²

The title—*A psalm of David*—is followed by an oath—*YHVH says or swears to my lord*. The questions are:

- (1) Who is recounting the words of the oath?
- (2) Who is *my lord* to whom YHVH delivers his promise?

Let’s review the answers to these questions in chronological order.

¹ It is an honor to contribute a chapter to this new book. David Howard and Andrew Schmutzer are well-known for their work on the Psalms and this book will surely become widely treasured.

² Unless otherwise noted, citations are the author’s own translation.

1. The Old View

Jesus asks the Pharisees: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” (Matt 22:42). They say the Messiah is the son of David. Jesus replies, citing this psalm, that no one calls his own son “lord,” and so the Messiah cannot be David’s son. Thus Jesus assumes, from the title, that the psalm is spoken by David, that “my lord” is the Messiah, and that David is recounting an oath uttered by YHVH to the Messiah. Three people: David, YHVH, Messiah. And it’s fair to add that this looks like the plain reading of the psalm. There does seem to be three people in the opening verse.

Two things are implied in Jesus’s interpretation. First, David knew or knew about the Messiah and about an oath made by the Holy One to the Messiah. Second, although Jesus leaves the question of the Messiah’s paternity unanswered, since it is understood that no mortal can be greater than David, the implication is that the Messiah is a heavenly man.

The Antiquity of this Interpretation

Now Jesus did not invent this interpretation. It was ancient in his time. It is implied in Daniel 7:14, where a son of man comes into the presence of the Ancient of Days to receive universal dominion. His riding the clouds shows he is a divine figure.³ The “thrones set in place” (7:9) imply that he is to sit enthroned at the hand of YHVH. And he is to set up a righteous kingdom over the earth, just as in Psalm 110:5–6. The whole passage—heavenly man, seated at the right hand, ruling the earth—can only derive from Psalm 110. Daniel 7 foreshadows Jesus’s interpretation of the psalm.

11QMelch, from the Dead Sea Scrolls, dates from about 100 BC, and features a heavenly hero called Melchizedek. Since Melchizedek appears in the Hebrew scriptures only in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110, and since this heavenly conqueror looks much like the martial figure of the psalm, it is clear that the psalm is part of the unspoken background to 11QMelchizedek too. This Melchizedek comes to liberate Zion, reward the righteous, and destroy wickedness. He must be understood as the Messiah, for he is identified, in lines 15 to 20, with Isaiah’s herald of peace to Zion (Isa 52:7), with Daniel’s *mashiah* prince (Dan 9:25), and with Isaiah’s servant of YHVH anointed (*mashiah*) by the spirit to comfort the afflicted of Zion (Isa 61:1–3). Yet he is also the God who judges the gods in Psalm 82:1 (11QMelch ii.10). He is the Elohim of Psalm 7:8, who, in the psalm, is YHVH (11QMelch ii.10–11). The “year of the LORD’S favor,” spoken of in Isaiah 61:2, becomes the “year of Melchizedek’s favor.” This conquering Melchizedek is a divine Messiah.

³ See J. A. Emerton, “The Origin of the Son of Man Imagery,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 9 (1958): 225–42.

The Similitudes of Enoch, dating perhaps from the turn of the era, take a similar line.⁴ The Son of Man is the chosen one of the Ancient of Days (Similitudes of Enoch 46:2); he shall be summoned before the throne of the Ancient of Days (47:3; 48:2) and sit enthroned (45:3); he is eternally preexistent (48:5), he is the Messiah (48:11), with universal dominion to destroy the wicked and console the righteous (46–48). It is all built on Psalm 110 and Daniel 7.

These passages, from before Jesus’s time, all derive from Psalm 110. They all interpret the psalm just as Jesus did—a divine Messiah comes from the presence of YHVH to rule the earth.

The Universality of This Interpretation

The antiquity of this view is confirmed by its universality in the time of Jesus. For the Pharisees also share it. After Jesus speaks, they do not reply, “We don’t accept your interpretation because we do not believe David spoke about the Messiah.” On the contrary, no one could answer him a word (Matt 22:46). Nor can anyone say this is just Matthew’s spin on the debate. He wrote his Gospel for the Hebrew-speaking community who knew what the Pharisees believed. His credibility depended on representing the Pharisees’ view squarely.

The Persistence of This Interpretation

This view was not only ancient and universal in the time of Jesus; it persisted in Judaism right through the next millennium. In the midrash on Psalms we read:

R. Yudan said in the name of R. Hama: In the time to come, the Holy One, blessed be he, seats the Lord Messiah at his right hand, as it is said, HaShem says to my lord, “Sit at my right hand” [Ps 110:1] (Midrash Tehillim 18.29).

Midrash Aleph Beth, from the fifth century, also gives a messianic interpretation.⁵ Here “Ephraim” signifies Messiah ben Joseph while “Gog and Magog” sets the scenario in the great end-time conflict of Ezekiel 36–37.

Ephraim my firstborn, come, sit at my right hand until I bring down the power of the horde of Gog and Magog, your enemies, beneath your footstool. As it is said, *HaShem says to my lord, Sit at my right hand*, etc. [Ps 110:1] (Midrash Aleph Beth §11b.1)

The midrash Otot Ha-Mashiah, from the early seventh century, applies the same text to the Messiah.

⁴ Estimates on the date of the sections of the Enoch compendium vary widely. The Similitudes are generally said to date from the time of Herod the Great. See L. W. Walck, *The Son of Man in the Parables of Enoch and Matthew* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 15–23.

⁵ For the dating, see D. Sawyer, *Midrash Aleph Beth* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 26–27.

And Messiah ben David will go, and Elijah the prophet. ... And then the Holy One, blessed be he, needs nothing for the battle, but to say to him [Messiah ben David], *Sit at my right hand* [Ps 110:1].⁶

A little later, a similar interpretation is found in the midrash Tefillat Rav Shimon ben Yoḥai.

The Holy One, blessed be he, will fight on behalf of Israel. He will say to the Messiah, *Sit at my right hand* [Ps 110:1].

As late as the thirteenth century, the Zohar makes the same interpretation, again of Messiah ben Joseph.

Jacob, changing his hands [Gen 48:14], placed ox [Ephraim] on the right and lion [Judah] on the left, for which reason *HaShem says to my lord: Sit at my right hand* [Ps 110:1]. This is the Tsadik Messiah ben Joseph (Zohar, Pinhas, §567).

Jesus's interpretation of the psalm was no novelty. It dated from at least the time of Daniel, it was widely accepted in his own day, and it persisted well into medieval times.

What Jesus Meant

Jesus, of course, claimed to be the Messiah. That was understood by everyone (Matt 12:23; 21:9), despite his reticence on the subject (e.g., Matt 16:20). But his particular claim in citing this psalm is that he is the Messiah whom David called "my lord," and he is therefore not David's son but a divine man. This agrees with what he says elsewhere about his own descent. For he never calls himself the son of David. Others do: Matthew the evangelist (Matt 1:1), the angel Gabriel (Luke 3:32), blind Bartimaeus (Matt 20:30–31; Mark 10:47), a Canaanite woman (Matt 15:22), the Palm Sunday crowds, and the children in the temple (Matt 21:9, 15; Mark 11:10). But Jesus never takes that name.

The preservation of this debate in all three Gospels suggests it became a *cause célèbre*. But following Jesus's explanation, the Pharisaic community would have found the old interpretation awkward. They found alternatives.

2. The Targum

One of these alternatives is preserved in the targum on Psalms, redacted in the mid-first millennium.⁷ It exists in two variants.

⁶ §8. For the date of Otot Ha-Mashiah and Tefillat Rav Shimon ben Yoḥai, see David C. Mitchell, *Messiah ben Joseph* (Newton Mearns: Campbell, 2016), 164, 265.

⁷ D. M. Stec, *The Targum of Psalms* (London: T&T Clark, 2004) dates it from the fourth to sixth century, but notes that, like every targum, it is composed of older material.

By the hand of David, a psalm. YY said in his decree [*b'memreh*] to make me lord of all Israel. But he said to me, “Wait yet for Saul of the tribe of Benjamin to die, for one reign must not encroach on another. And afterwards I will make your enemies a stool for your feet.”

[By the hand of David, a psalm.] YY said in his decree [*b'memreh*] to give me the dominion in exchange for sitting in study of Torah. “Wait at my right hand until I make your enemies a stool for your feet.”

The first one plays on “my right hand” (*y'mini*) and Saul the Benjamite (*ben-y'mini*). But both interpretations enshrine the same idea, namely that David is both the speaker and “my lord” who receives the promise. The three figures of the original psalm have become two: David the psalmist, YHVH the promiser, and David the promisee.

One might wonder how this happened. Of course, *b'memreh*, “in his decree,” is common targum locution for divine speech. Perhaps it shouldn't arouse any speculation. Yet the change of just one letter—to *l'memreh*—would give a different sense altogether.

By the hand of David, a psalm. YY said to his Memra [Logos], “Sit at my right hand,”
etc.

There is no surviving evidence for the existence of such a text.⁸ But, if it ever existed, it would fully reflect the ancient three-person interpretation: David, YHVH, and “my lord” the divine Memra.

But, however it happened, the fact is that the targum has lost someone from Psalm 110:1. David the speaker and David's “my lord” have melded together, something quite at odds with the psalm.

3. The Talmud Bavli

The Talmud Bavli, Nedarim 32b, presents another interpretation. It identifies Melchizedek with Shem ben Noah. The gist of it is that Melchizedek aka Shem was in line for the eternal priesthood or *k'hunah* spoken of in Psalm 110:4. But because he flouted blessing protocol—blessing Abram before El Elyon—the *k'hunah* went to Abram and his seed.

R. Zechariah said in the name of R. Ishmael: The Holy One, blessed be He, wished to derive the *k'hunah* from Shem, as it is said: And he was *kohen* to El Elyon (Gen. 14.18).
[But] since he [Shem/Melchizedek] prefaced the blessing of Avram to the blessing of ha-Maqom [the Omnipresent], he [God] derived it from Avram, as it is said: *And he*

⁸ Pietro Galatino (1460–1540) testified to having seen such a targum in the sixteenth century (so John Gill on Ps 110). But Galatino's polemical intent might lead to suspicion of his testimony.

blessed him and said, “Blessed be Avram by El Elyon possessor of the heavens and earth, and blessed be El Elyon” (Gen 14.19–20).

Avraham said to him, “And does one preface the blessing of the slave to the blessing of his master?”

Immediately he [God] gave it [the *k'hunah*] to Avraham, as it is said, *HaShem said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I set your enemies as a stool for your feet’* (Ps. 110:1). And after this it is written, The Lord has sworn and will not repent. *You are a priest forever ‘al-dibrati Malki-zedeq* (Gen. 110.4), that is, on account of that which Melchizedek had said [*l'divoro shel malki-tsedeq*]. This corresponds to what is written, *And he was kohen to El Elyon.* [Which means] he [Melchizedek] was a *kohen*, but his sons were not *kohanim* [i.e., Melchizedek lost the hereditary *k'hunah* to Avram]. (Nedarim 32b).⁹

Now, David is not even mentioned here. But the implication, in citing Psalm 110:1, is that while David could not call his son *lord*, he could call his ancestor Abraham *lord*. And so we get quite another three-person interpretation of verse 1: David the psalmist, YHVH, and Abraham, who is “my lord.” This view was endorsed by Rashi. But the problem with it, as Ibn Ezra rightly notes, is that Abraham never ruled from Zion.

4. Ibn Ezra

Ibn Ezra (1089–1167) developed a new version of the targum interpretation: the psalm was written not *by* David but *for* David by one of the temple singers. And so David was “my lord,” but the speaker was one of the temple singers. So again, we have three people: Levite psalmist, YHVH, and David (“my lord”). This view is followed by Radak (1160–1235), Yeshayahu Mitrani (d. 1260), and by most modern scholars. But it has two weaknesses. First, David did not become an eternal priest (Ps 110:4), and so the prophecy is false. Second, it assumes that *l'david* can be understood as *concerning David*. This assumption was accepted by no one in ancient times—neither Jesus nor the Pharisees nor the apostles nor the targum nor the Talmud. Nor could Ramban accept it.

5. Ramban

⁹ See B. Sanhedrin 108b: R. Hana b. Liwai said: Shem Rabba [i.e., Melchizedek] said to Eliezer [Abraham’s servant]: “When the kings of the east and the west attacked you, what did you do?” He replied, “The Holy One, blessed be he, took Abraham and set him at his right hand, and they threw dust which turned to swords, and chaff which turned to arrows, as it is said, *A Psalm of David. HaShem said to my lord, Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.* See also Midrash Psalm 110 §4.

Ramban (1194–1270), at the Barcelona Disputation, offered an improvement of Ibn Ezra’s theory. The psalm was written *by* David, as the title implies. But he wrote it for the singers to sing about him. Menachem Meiri (1249–1306) agreed, sagely adding that if David had written, “HaShem says to me,” then it would have been untrue when sung by the Levite singers. So again, we have three people: Levite singer, YHVH, and David (composer and “my lord”). But this interpretation has weaknesses too. As with Ibn Ezra’s view, David was not a priest forever, and so the prophecy is false. Further, it paints a lonely picture of David writing praise songs and prophecies about himself, which isn’t how it’s supposed to be (Prov 27:2).

Summary

Jesus’s interpretation of Psalm 110:1 was ancient and widespread in Jesus’s own time. It was followed, naturally, by patristic writers. Yet Judaism, apparently in reaction to Christian use of the psalm, proposed a series of alternative interpretations. Strangely enough, modern scholarship—even conservative Christian scholarship—routinely ignores Jesus’s interpretation in favor of Ibn Ezra’s. Yet Ibn Ezra’s view not only reduces the psalm to false prophecy and ignores the authorial sense of the title, but it leaves the psalm as only an ancient royal panegyric, legitimizing David’s inheritance of a supposed line of Jebusite sacral kings—Melchizedek, Adonizedek (Josh 10:1–3)—which can be vaguely understood as pointing to the Messiah.¹⁰

If we ask why Jesus’s view has been sidelined, the answer is surely that, while it is consistent enough, it is hard to swallow. For it implies that David is reporting an oath made by the Holy One to the Messiah. This implies, in turn, not only a preexistent Messiah—alive in David’s time—but also David’s insider knowledge of the promise made by the Holy One to the preexistent divine Messiah. That is a lot to take on board. But it is, I think, exactly what the psalm is saying. Let’s turn to verse 4.

Who’s Who in Psalm 110:4

Most translations of Psalm 110:4 run something like the NIV below.

The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind:

“You are a priest forever, in the order of [‘al-dibrati] Melchizedek.”

In other words, YHVH is appointing someone—perhaps “my lord” of verse 1—as an eternal priest. Yet all such translations have at their core an unbearable conundrum. Let’s break it down into two puzzles.

¹⁰ Examples could be numerous. From a generation ago, see T. Ishida, *The Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel*, BZAW 142 (Berlin: de Gruyter), 137–40; L. C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150* (Waco, TX: Word), 81; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 159–60; J. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 351; J. Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 291.

Puzzle one: If YHVH makes someone a priest forever like Melchizedek, it implies that Melchizedek is a priest forever.

Someone might object: “No, this person is made an eternal priest *like* Melchizedek, but the original priesthood of Melchizedek was temporary, not eternal.”

But that would be as if I, invested with high authority, said to someone, “I make you Archbishop of Canterbury forever and ever, in the order of Donald Coggan.”

The recipient of my boon would reply, “Wow! Thank you. But hang on. Donald Coggan wasn’t archbishop forever. He’s dead!”

In the same way, it makes no sense to appoint someone an eternal priest in the image of a mortal.

Further, if Melchizedek’s priesthood was not eternal, then who would want it? After all, the promise of verse 4 was made when the sons of Aaron had a functioning priesthood. That was worth something. But to bestow on someone the defunct priesthood of a defunct Canaanite was not better, but worse. All Canaanites were accursed (Gen 9:25). And even if Melchizedek’s ancient priesthood was originally in some unknown way better than Aaron’s, in what way, being extinct, is it now better? Better a live dog than a dead lion.

So, if Melchizedek is not a priest forever, then Psalm 110:4 is absurd. But if he is a priest forever, then he is an immortal. In that case, one must ask, “Where is Melchizedek and what is he doing now?”

Puzzle two: If Melchizedek is an eternal priest, and YHVH makes someone else an eternal priest, then there are now two eternal priests. How can this be? Either there are two rival priests eternally offering access to the one God, or there is something wrong with the translation.

In the “What” of Melchizedek?

The words “in the order of Melchizedek” represent the Hebrew *‘al-dibrati malki-tsedeq*. The word *‘al* means “upon” or “according to.” And *malki-tsedeq* is self-explanatory. The key issue is what does *dibrati* mean?

Dibrati is a form of the feminine noun *dibrah*. It’s a rare word. But it comes from a common root—*dbr*—which gives rise to a constellation of related words meaning “word,” “speak,” “matter,” “thing,” “reason,” or “promise.” *Dibrah* never appears in the Bible in its simple form, but only with its ending modified to *dibrat* or *dibrati*. These two forms look similar, but their meanings are different.

Dibrat is in the Hebrew possessive or construct case.¹¹ It means “the *dibrah* of [something].” This is how it appears in Daniel and Ecclesiastes, where it has roughly the sense “for the sake of” or “about the matter of .”

For the sake that [‘*al-dibrat*] the king may know the interpretation and that you may understand the thoughts of your heart. (Dan 2:30)

I said in my heart about the matter of [‘*al-dibrat*] the sons of men. (Eccl 3:18)

Consider that God has appointed this one as well as that, so that/for the sake that [‘*al-dibrat*] man may not find out anything that will be after him. (Eccl 7:14)

Keep the king’s command for the sake of [‘*al-dibrat*] your oath to God. (Eccl 8:2)

But *dibrati* has quite a different meaning. The final letter *i* is the first-person singular possessive suffix. So *dibrati* means “the *dibrah* of me” or “my *dibrah*.” It appears only one other time in the Bible, in Job, where it means something like “my matter” or “case” or “cause.”

But I would seek God and to God would I commit my cause [*dibrati*]. (Job 5:8)

Taking *dibrati* as it stands, the natural reading of Psalm 110:4 should be:

You are a *kohen* forever, according to my *dibrah* [‘*al-dibrat*].

There are no two ways about this. Those who translate ‘*al dibrati Malki-tsedeq*’ as “according to/in the order of Melchizedek” are ignoring the plain sense of the Hebrew. And we must ask how they justify it and why they do it.

They justify it by taking the *i*-vowel on the end of *dibrati* not as a possessive suffix, but as either a poetic flourish (a paragogic *yodh*) or as an archaic suffix to the simple construct.¹² Thus reckoned, *dibrati* means just *dibrat*: “the *dibrat* [of] Melchizedek.”

Why they resort to this maneuver is another question altogether. It’s not new. It is implied in the Vulgate of Jerome who endorsed the rabbinic idea that Melchizedek was Shem.¹³ And it continues to this day because the implications of taking the *i*-vowel as a possessive are hard to swallow.

¹¹ In the English genitive, the possessor noun is modified: “The king’s sons” (adding the genitive ending to king). But in Hebrew the end of the noun which is possessed is modified to the construct state: “sons-of the king” (*b’nei ha-melekh*).

¹² A parallel is seen in the name Melchizedek (*malki-tsedeq*) itself. The *-i* on the end of *malki* is indeed part of the ancient semitic construct, as the writer to the Hebrews understood when he translated it “king of righteousness” (Heb 7:2).

¹³ Jerome, Epistle 73. It is not implied in the LXX. For an extended discussion, see my forthcoming book, *Jesus: The Incarnation of the Word* (Newton Mearns: Campbell, 2021).

Yet the text makes perfect sense as plain classical Hebrew. One must simply take *'al-dibrati* as it stands, as a first-person suffix, just as in Job. In that case, the Holy One is calling someone a *kohen* (priest) “for my sake” or “for my cause.”¹⁴

But who? Well, if *dibrati* is no longer in the construct case, then it is no longer joined to *malki-tsedeq*. There is no longer anything “of Melchizedek.” The name Melchizedek has been cut free and must now be taken as a vocative, and the whole phrase becomes,

You are a *kohen* for ever for my sake, [O] Melchizedek.

And since nouns from the root *dbr* often carry the meaning of something said, we may take *dibrati* to mean “according to my promise” or “saying” or “decree”¹⁵:

You are a *kohen* forever according to my decree, [O] Melchizedek.

Suddenly the light is switched on. The nameless figure in verse 4 is gone. With him is gone the intolerable conundrum of two eternal priests. There are not two priests, but one. And he is “my lord” of verse 1. It is Melchizedek alone who is promised eternal priesthood and universal dominion.

Lest anyone doubt such a translation, here’s a passage from Zohar Ḥadash where *'al-dibrati* can be understood only as a promise from the Holy One to Melchizedek.

The Holy One, blessed be he, took Shem ben Noah and made him *kohen* of Elyon to serve him, and his *shekhinah* rested upon him. And he called his name Melchizedek, King of Salem. And his brother, Japheth, learned Torah from him in his school, until Abraham came and taught Torah in the school of Shem. And the Holy One, blessed be he, turned his attention to Abraham and forgot all the others. Abraham came and prayed before the Holy One, blessed be he, that his *shekhinah* should always dwell in the House of Shem, and he consented, as it is said: *You are a kohen forever according to my promise (al-dibrati), Melchizedek.* (Noah §128).

In fact, the same interpretation can be detected in the passage from Bavli Nedarim 32b, cited above, where Melchizedek is ousted in favor of Abraham. For when R. Zechariah deflects the promise

¹⁴ This is confirmed by the Masoretic cantillation: *'al-dibrati* is cantillated with *revia mugrash*, a pausal or disjunctive sign-pair. It is equivalent to a comma before Melchizedek, just as I have given it above: “for my sake, Melchizedek.” But if *dibrati* were a construct form, with the sense “the order of Melchizedek,” then a conjunctive sign would have been required. We see exactly this in the next psalm, where *yirat* and *yhvh* (“the fear of YHVH”) are joined with *illuy* over *yirat* (Ps 111:10); so too in Psalms 19:9 (ET) and 34:11 (ET), the same phrase is joined with conjunctives—*mahpakh* and *merkha* respectively.

¹⁵ Just as R. Zechariah, in Nedarim 32b, took *'al-dibrati* to mean “the saying of Melchizedek” (*l'divoro shel malki-tsedeq*).

of *k'hunah* from Melchizedek-Shem to Abraham, the argument presumes that the promise was originally made to Melchizedek.

With this reading, Melchizedek is no longer a mysterious proto-Canaanite priest who met Abram a thousand years before David's time. He is someone David knew in his own time and called "my lord." David overheard words from the invisible God to Melchizedek. He heard the vow and recorded it. It may be mind-boggling. It may go against all current understanding of this and every psalm. But there it is. It is the plain sense of *'al-dibrati*.

So Who Is Melchizedek?

This means that Melchizedek, who appeared to Abram, also appeared to David. Now I could argue from Genesis that Melchizedek was none other than the Angel of YHVH, the divine Logos who appeared to Hagar, Abram, Jacob, Moses, and David. But space does not allow that. So let me cite others who have taken Melchizedek to be the Logos or a divine Messiah figure.

(1) 11QMelch makes Melchizedek the Messiah and Elohim of Israel. With my proposed reading of Psalm 110:4, the two texts now match up perfectly. For, in Psalm 110:5–7, it is now divine Melchizedek who conquers the world from Zion, while, in 11QMelch, it is divine Melchizedek who does the same thing.

(2) Philo Judaeus was much taken by the identity of the "second God," the Logos. The Logos is to God as sunlight to the sun (*On Dreams* 1.239). He is the one through whom all things were created and who sustains all things (*Planting* 10). He is "God's man, the Logos of the Eternal, who must be immortal" (*Tongues* 41). He is "the high priest, his firstborn, the Divine Logos" (*On Dreams* 1.215) and "the high priest and king" (*On Flight* 118). Moses saw the Logos on Sinai (*Confusion of Tongues* 97). The Angel of the Lord was the Logos (*Cherubim* 3, 35). The Logos is Melchizedek.

Melchizedek shall bring forth wine instead of water, and shall give your souls to drink, and shall cheer them with unmixed wine, in order that they may be wholly possessed by divine intoxication, more sober than sobriety itself. For the Logos is a priest, having, as his inheritance the true God, and entertaining lofty and sublime and magnificent ideas about him, *For he is the priest of the most high God* (Gen. 14:18). (*Allegorical Interpretation* 3.82)

(3) The writer to the Hebrews says that Melchizedek is "without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God, he remains a priest forever" (Heb 7:3). If he meant what he said, then he believed Melchizedek is an unbegotten and immortal divinity.

Some object, saying, "like the Son of God" means Melchizedek is not the Son of God. But, in that case, we again have two eternal priests—Melchizedek and the Son of God. And that makes no more sense in Hebrews than it did in the psalm. So it cannot be correct. After all, if one asks, "Who is like the Son of

God?”, the answer must be, “Only the Son of God.” I suggest that the author of Hebrews thought Melchizedek and the Son of God are one and the same.

(4) The Four Craftsmen *baraita*, with its line-up of messianic heroes, appears throughout rabbinic literature. The oldest versions present Melchizedek as a priestly messiah to appear in the messianic time.

The flowers appear on the earth (Song 2.12). R. Isaac said, “It is written: And the Lord showed me four craftsmen (Zech 2.3). These are they: Elijah, the King Messiah, Melchizedek and the War Messiah.” (Pesikta Rabbati §15.14–15).¹⁶

(5) Ambrose of Milan initially believed that Melchizedek was only a type of Christ.¹⁷ But later he wrote:

God is Melchisedech, that is, he is king of peace and justice, having neither the beginning of days nor end of life.¹⁸

Conclusion

My above reading of Psalm 110 sees three people in the psalm: David, YHVH, and Melchizedek. Jesus, following ancient interpretation, also sees three people in the psalm: David, YHVH, and the Messiah.

I suggest that Jesus and those who first coined this interpretation (a) were savvy enough to realize there could not be two eternal priests, (b) took *‘al-dibrati* according to its plain sense, which makes Melchizedek inevitably a vocative, and (c) made the link between Melchizedek and the Messiah. In fact, according to any other reading, it is difficult to find the Messiah in the psalm at all. But with this reading, the Messiah is crystal clear.

Such a reading has implications for how we understand biblical prophecy. The contemporary view tends to see the prophets speaking of events in their own time and, unconsciously, uttering messianic pointers. Psalm 110 is viewed as an enthronement psalm which accidentally points to the Messiah. But, if my conclusions above are correct, there is no historical sacral kingship in this psalm. It was messianic prophecy *ab initio*. If that is so, we might find ourselves coming to similar conclusions about other psalms, particularly Psalm 2. This might influence how we read the Prophets as well.

But back to Jesus. If he believed Melchizedek is the Messiah, and if he believed himself to be the Messiah, then why did he not just say, “I am Melchizedek”? In John 8, he says,

¹⁶ The same text is in Pesikta de Rav Kahana 5.9 and Song Rabbah 2.13.4. For all the variants, and a discussion of the *baraita* and its antecedents, see my *Messiah ben Joseph*, 140–43.

¹⁷ *On Faith* 3.11 (before AD 380); *On Abraham* 1.3 (AD 380). His view first changes in *On the Mysteries* 8.46 (AD 387).

¹⁸ *The Six Days of Creation* 1.3 (AD 389).

Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day. He saw and was glad (8:56).¹⁹

Some translations resort to paraphrase, implying that Jesus meant that Abraham foresaw the Messiah but did not actually see him. Others may imagine that Abraham, in the heavens, saw Jesus coming to earth. But Jesus's hearers understood his words perfectly well: "You are not yet fifty and you have seen Abraham!" (8:57) Nor does Jesus object. ("No, no. You've misunderstood. I meant that Abraham *fore*-saw me.") Not at all. He is happy with what they understand: Jesus saw Abraham, Abraham saw Jesus. In fact, he adds, he existed before Abraham: "Before Abraham was, I am" (8:58).

When did Abraham see Jesus? Was it when YHVH appeared to Abraham in human form in Genesis 18? Or when the divine angel spoke to him in Genesis 22? Perhaps. But these intermittent visits seem brief, whereas "Abraham rejoiced to see my day" implies a period of residence. I wonder if Jesus is not speaking of the time when Melchizedek, the angel of YHVH, ruled in Salem and brought Abraham bread and wine at the defeat of the kings of the east.²⁰

¹⁹ Ἀβραὰμ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν ἠγαλλιάσατο ἵνα ἴδῃ τὴν ἡμέραν τὴν ἐμὴν, καὶ εἶδεν καὶ ἐχάρη.

²⁰ For those interested in other interpretational cruxes of Psalm 110, the view I have given above supports the LXX reading of verse 3, which takes Hebrew לִידְתִּיכָה as *y'lid'tikha*, "I have begotten you" [LXX: *exegennêsa se*] "from the womb, before the Morning Star," against the Masoretic Text's יַלְדֻתְכָה (*yaldutekha*) "your youth."