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MELCHIZEDEK  
W LITERATURZE  
WCZESNOCHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIEJ  
I GNOSTYCKIEJ

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## Spis treści

<b>Wstęp</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Zasady cytowania, tworzenia przypisów i bibliografii</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b>Wykaz skrótów</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>Rozdział 1</b>	
<b>Melchizedek w literaturze patrystycznej w II–III wieku</b> .....	<b>49</b>
<b>1.1. Melchizedek figurą Chrystusa (Justyn Apologeta)</b> .....	<b>50</b>
1.1.1. Spotkanie Abrahama z Melchizedekiem w kontekście typologii chrystologicznej .....	50
1.1.2. Melchizedek figurą Chrystusa a nie króla Ezechiasza .....	52
1.1.3. Kapłan nieobrzezanych .....	53
1.1.4. Wyższość Melchizedeka nad Abrahamem .....	54
1.1.5. Zapowiedź nowego i doskonałego kapłaństwa Chrystusa .....	54
<b>1.2. Święty król i pierwszy wśród kapłanów (Teofil z Antiochii)</b> .....	<b>56</b>
1.2.1. Święty król w świętym mieście .....	57
1.2.2. Pierwszy wśród kapłanów .....	58
<b>1.3. Melchizedek doskonałym wyznawcą Prawa (Tertulian)</b> .....	<b>59</b>
1.3.1. Kapłaństwo Melchizedeka wyprzedza Prawo Mojżeszowe.....	59
1.3.2. Melchizedek wzorem przestrzegania Prawa Bożego.....	60
1.3.2.1. Melchizedek znakiem nowego obrzezania .....	61
1.3.2.2. Melchizedek zapowiedzią doskonałego szabatu w Chrystusie .....	62
<b>1.4. Typologia chrystologiczna według Ps 110 (św. Ireneusz)</b> .....	<b>63</b>
<b>1.5. Typologia chrystologiczna i eucharystyczna Melchizedeka (Klemens Al.)</b> .....	<b>65</b>
1.5.1. Król pokoju i znawca służby Bożej.....	66
1.5.2. Ofiara Melchizedeka zapowiedzią eucharystii .....	67
<b>1.6. Typologia chrystologiczna Melchizedeka i zapowiedź darów eucharystycznych (św. Cyprian)</b> .....	<b>71</b>
1.6.1. Melchizedek w gronie nieobrzezanych patriarchów .....	72
1.6.2. Ofiara Melchizedeka zapowiada dary eucharystyczne.....	73
<b>1.7. Melchizedek figurą Chrystusa nowego Kapłana (Orygenes)</b> .....	<b>76</b>
1.7.1. Sytuacja pism Orygenesza .....	77
1.7.2. Obietnica, przysięga i wiara Abrahama w kontekście spotkania z Melchizedekiem ..	78
1.7.3. Melchizedek figurą najwyższego kapłana i ofiary Nowego Przymierza w kontekście przepisów kultowych w ST .....	83
1.7.3.1. Melchizedek zapowiedzią doskonałego Arcykapłana .....	83
1.7.3.2. Kapłaństwo Chrystusa na wzór Melchizedeka a przepisy kultowe Starego Prawa.....	84
1.7.3.3. Melchizedek figurą kapłana eschatologicznego .....	85
1.7.3.4. Chrystus królem i kapłanem na wzór Melchizedeka .....	86
1.7.3.5. Chrystus kapłanem na wzór Melchizedeka i ofiarą na wzór Izaaka .....	86
1.7.3.6. Duchowy sens błogosławieństwa Melchizedeka.....	87

1.7.4. Przysięga w Ps 110, 4 i ofiara w Rdz 14. Ojciec i Syn, kapłan i ofiara .....	87
1.7.5. Król i kapłan w Jerozolimie .....	90
1.7.6. Arcykapłan według Aarona <i>versus</i> arcykapłan według Melchizedeka .....	90
1.7.7. Chrystus Arcykapłanem liturgii duchowej .....	92
1.7.8. Melchizedek sprawiedliwy .....	92

## Rozdział 2

### Melchizedek i jego szczególne funkcje w tekstach o charakterze gnostyckim ..... 99

<b>2.1. Postać i funkcje Melchizedeka w NHC IX, 1.....</b>	<b>99</b>
2.1.1. Imię Melchizedeka .....	100
2.1.2. Objawienie udzielone Melchizedekowi .....	102
2.1.3. Pierwsza modlitwa Melchizedeka i hierarchia setiańskiej Pleromy .....	103
2.1.4. Zapowiedź ofiary (6, 22 – 7, 9?) .....	105
2.1.5. Zapowiedź chrztu (7, 25 – 8, 10) .....	106
2.1.6. Posłannictwo Melchizedeka w kontekście gnostyckiej historii zbawienia .....	107
2.1.7. Liturgia Melchizedeka (14, 13 – 16, 6) .....	109
2.1.7.1. Modlitwa dziękczynna (14, 15 – 15, 7) .....	110
2.1.7.2. Melchizedek obdarzony godnością Najwyższego Kapłana (15, 7 – 16, 16) .....	110
2.1.7.2.1. Kapłański tytuł Melchizedeka .....	111
2.1.7.2.2. Ofiara .....	114
2.1.7.2.3. Chrztost i imiona świętych .....	116
2.1.7.3. Hymn Melchizedeka (16, 16 – 18, 7) .....	119
2.1.8. Ostatnie objawienie (19, 2 – 27, 6) .....	121
2.1.8.1. Męka Zbawcy i zachęta do wytrwałości pod adresem Melchizedeka .....	122
2.1.8.2. Pochwała dzieła wspólnoty Melchizedeka (?) .....	124
<b>2.2. Melchizedek we fragmencie z Deir el-Bala'izah .....</b>	<b>128</b>
2.2.1. Gnostycka interpretacja Hbr 7, 3 .....	135
2.2.2. Identyfikacja Melchizedeka z Semem (?) .....	137
<b>2.3. Melchizedek w <i>Drugiej Księdze Jeu</i> .....</b>	<b>138</b>
2.3.1. Ofiara chleba i wina oraz znaki chrzcielne .....	139
2.3.2. Chrztost ogniem .....	140
2.3.3. Interpretacja imion i znaków magicznych .....	141
2.3.4. Rozbudowana forma liturgii chrztost .....	142
2.3.5. Melchizedek z przydomkiem Zorokothora .....	143
2.3.6. Funkcje Melchizedeka .....	143
2.3.7. Czerpanie wody chrztost .....	144
2.3.8. Ofiarowanie chleba i wina .....	144
<b>2.4. Melchizedek w <i>Pistis Sophia</i> .....</b>	<b>145</b>
2.4.1. Melchizedek w Czwartej Księdze <i>Pistis Sophia</i> .....	146
2.4.1.1. Dwie moce światłości .....	147
2.4.1.2. Melchizedek pośrednikiem wybawienia elementów światłości spod władzy archontów .....	149

2.4.2. Melchizedek w księgach 1-3 <i>Pistis Sophia</i> .....	151
2.4.2.1. Oczyszczanie światłości orbitalnych .....	151
2.4.2.2. Wielki Paralempstor .....	153
2.4.2.3. Wędrowka światłości pomiędzy Pięcioma drzewami .....	154
2.4.2.4. Pieczętowanie duszy w trakcie jej wędrówki do Skarbca światłości .....	156

### Rozdział 3

#### Heterodoksyjne ujęcia postaci Melchizedeka ..... 164

3.1. Melchizedek najwyższą mocą Bożą według Teodota z Bizancjum i jego szkoły (Pseudo-Hipolit).....	164
3.2. Melchizedek jednym z aniołów (Pseudo-Tertulian).....	168
3.3. Większy od Chrystusa (Epifaniusz z Salaminy).....	170
3.4. Domniemana sekta melchizedekian (Filastriusz z Brescii) .....	173
3.5. Melchizedek i Duch Święty w nauczaniu Hierakasa z Egiptu .....	175
3.6. Melchizedek i Duch Święty według Ambrozjastra .....	181
3.7. Melchizedek i Syn Boży ( <i>Apophthegmata patrum</i> i Tomasz z Marga).....	191
3.8. Polemiki Cyryla Aleksandryjskiego .....	193
3.9. Melchizedekianie według Marka Eremity .....	198
3.10. Melchizedekianie z Frygii (?) .....	201
3.10.1. Świadek Tymoteusza z Konstantynopola .....	201
3.10.2. Mowa przeciw melchizedekianom Metodego z Konstantynopola (?) .....	203
3.10.3. <i>Formula abjuratonis athinganorum</i> .....	205
3.11. Melchizedek w nauczaniu chrześcijańskiego gnostyka zwanego Janem z Apemei .....	206

### Rozdział 4

#### Dojrzałe ujęcia chrześcijańskie od IV do VI wieku ..... 213

4.1. Typologia chrystologiczna i kapłańska .....	213
4.1.1. Melchizedek figurą kapłana nowego porządku (Euzebiusz z Cezarei).....	213
4.1.1.1. Melchizedek większy od Abrahama. Sprawiedliwość przed Prawem .....	214
4.1.1.2. Najwyższy kapłan Najwyższego Boga .....	216
4.1.1.3. Biskup nowym Melchizedekiem.....	217
4.1.2. Rozwój typologii chrystologicznej Melchizedeka (Ambroży z Mediolanu).....	220
4.1.2.1. Spotkanie z Melchizedekiem jako teofania (?).....	220
4.1.2.2. Ofiara Abrahama, błogosławieństwo Melchizedeka.....	223
4.1.2.3. Melchizedek symbolem racjonalności.....	226
4.1.2.4. Kapłaństwo Melchizedeka zapowiada misterium Chrystusa.....	227
4.1.2.5. Chrystologiczna i antropologiczna interpretacja Melchizedeka.....	228
4.1.2.6. Melchizedek figurą kapłaństwa i władzy Chrystusa .....	231
4.1.3. Typologia chrystologiczna i kapłańska Melchizedeka (Augustyn z Hippony) .....	234
4.1.3.1. Dziesięcina w scenie spotkania Melchizedeka z Abrahamem w kontekście rozważań antropologicznych.....	235
4.1.3.2. Chrystus wyjaśnia tajemnicę ofiary Melchizedeka .....	236

4.1.3.3. Kapłaństwo według Melchizedeka nie ustaje .....	238
4.1.3.4. Królewska i kapłańska godność Melchizedeka według Ps 110, 4.....	238
<b>4.2. Interpretacje sceny z Rdz 14, 18-20 związane z typologią eucharystyczną.....</b>	<b>240</b>
4.2.1. Dary ofiarowane przez Melchizedeka figurą darów eucharystycznych .....	243
4.2.1.1. Ofiara Melchizedeka zapowiedzią ofiary Kościoła (Euzebiusz z Cezarei) .....	243
4.2.1.2. Dary Melchizedeka zapowiedzią zbawczego Pokarmu (Epifaniusz z Salaminy).....	245
4.2.1.3. Chleb i wino znakami Eucharystii (Ambrożyjster).....	246
4.2.1.4. Chleb i wino w Rdz 14, Ciało i Krew Pańska w Kościele (Hieronim) .....	247
4.2.1.5. Ofiara Melchizedeka zapowiedzią Paschy Chrystusa.....	247
4.2.1.6. Święty dar dla Abrahama i zwyczajny posiłek dla wojowników (Iszodad z Merw) ..	248
4.2.1.7. Gest Melchizedeka i słowa Chrystusa ( <i>Leksykon Sudy</i> ) .....	251
4.2.2. Gest ofiarny z Rdz 14, 18-20 zapowiedzią ofiary Chrystusa (Ambrożyj z Mediolanu i Augustyn z Hippony) .....	252
4.2.2.1. Łaska świętej ofiary Melchizedeka .....	252
4.2.2.2. Posługa Melchizedeka i sakramenty Kościoła .....	253
4.2.2.3. Scena ofiary Melchizedeka zapowiedzią ofiary eucharystycznej .....	258
4.2.2.4. Ofiara Melchizedeka jako figura ofiary chrześcijanina .....	260
4.2.2.5. Eucharystia ofiarą Chrystusa i nową ucztą według obrządku Melchizedeka.....	261
4.2.3. Próby całościowego ujęcia sceny z Rdz 14, 18nn w kontekście typologii eucharystycznej.....	262
4.2.3.1. Chleb, wino i gest ofiarowania zapowiedzią misterium Chrystusa i Kościoła (Jan z Damaszku).....	262
4.2.3.2. Arcykapłan i zapowiedź ofiary doskonałej ( <i>Kanon rzymski</i> ).....	264
4.2.3.3. Scena z Melchizedekiem pomostem pomiędzy rytami Starego i Nowego Prawa (Pseudo-Chryzostom).....	267
4.2.4. Wyższość porządku Melchizedeka nad porządkiem Aarona .....	269
<b>4.3. Przesłanki antropologiczne w interpretacji postaci Melchizedeka.....</b>	<b>274</b>
4.3.1. Rodowód i tożsamość Melchizedeka (Epifaniusz z Salaminy).....	275
4.3.1.1. Imiona rodziców Melchizedeka .....	276
4.3.1.2. Melchizedek utożsamiany z Semem, synem Noego .....	277
4.3.1.3. Lokalizacja Salem .....	279
4.3.2. Św. Hieronim, Melchizedek i poszukiwanie <i>veritas hebraica</i> .....	282
4.3.2.1. Ludzka natura Melchizedeka; zgoda na judaistyczną genealogię.....	282
4.3.2.2. Akceptacja tradycji hebrajskich .....	284
4.3.2.3. Melchizedek i Sem (Hieronim i Augustyn) .....	284
4.3.2.4. Kapłaństwo pierworodnych.....	287
4.3.2.5. Druga wersja lokalizacji Salem .....	288
4.3.3. Chrześcijanka w pałacu Melchizedeka (Egeria) .....	291
<b>4.4. Melchizedek w teologii V wieku (Marek Eremita i Cyryl Al.) .....</b>	<b>296</b>
4.4.1. Ludzka natura Melchizedeka i bóstwo Chrystusa .....	299
4.4.2. Poprawne rozumienie słów κατὰ τὰξιν .....	300
4.4.3. Upodobnienie Melchizedeka do Syna Bożego.....	301

4.4.4. Bez ojca, matki, rodowodu .....	301
4.4.5. Trwałość kapłaństwa Melchizedeka dzięki świadectwu Pisma .....	302
4.4.6. Nazwa Salem.....	303
4.4.7. Dziesięcina.....	305
4.4.8. Kapłaństwo w relacji pomiędzy Starym i Nowym Przymierzem.....	305
<b>Rozdział 5</b>	
<b>Chrześcijańskie apokryfy o Melchizedeku.....</b>	<b>310</b>
<b>5.1. Melchizedek w <i>Jaskini skarbów</i> i tekstach związanych z cyklem Adama.....</b>	<b>310</b>
5.1.1. Testament Adama .....	312
5.1.2. Testament Noego – sekret mesjański.....	314
5.1.3. Sem i Melchizedek .....	315
5.1.4. Golgota i centrum świata .....	316
5.1.5. Melchizedek jako nazirejczyk.....	318
5.1.6. Nadprzyrodzony charakter posługi Melchizedeka .....	320
5.1.7. Pogłoska o śmierci Melchizedeka .....	322
5.1.8. Melchizedek i Abraham .....	323
5.1.9. Melchizedek i założenie Jerozolimy .....	325
5.1.10. Melchizedek i Rebeka.....	326
5.1.11. Dwie genealogie Melchizedeka.....	327
<b>5.2. <i>Legenda o Melchizedeku pseudoatanazjańska</i> .....</b>	<b>333</b>
5.2.1. Genealogia Melchizedeka .....	335
5.2.2. Kwestia monoteizmu.....	337
5.2.3. Tradycja góry Tabor .....	341
5.2.4. Melchizedek anachoretą .....	344
5.2.5. Spotkanie z Abrahamem i misterium Chrystusa .....	346
5.2.6. Liczba towarzyszy Abrahama .....	350
5.2.7. Melchizedek powraca do swego miasta; <i>Legenda</i> w wersji Wanakana Wardapeta .....	351
<b>Zakończenie.....</b>	<b>356</b>
<b>Bibliografia.....</b>	<b>365</b>
<b>Indeks biblijny.....</b>	<b>404</b>
<b>Indeks cytowanych i wzmiankowanych autorów i tytułów pism antycznych .....</b>	<b>412</b>
<b>Indeks rzeczowy.....</b>	<b>415</b>
<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>426</b>

## Table of Contents

### MELCHIZEDEK IN EARLY CHRISTIAN AND Gnostic LITERATURE

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Rules of citations, notes and bibliography.....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Abbreviations.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Chapter One:</b>	
<b>Melchizedek in patristic literature of the second and third centuries.....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>1.1. Melchizedek as a figure of Christ (Justin Martyr) .....</b>	<b>50</b>
1.1.1. Abraham's and Melchizedek's meeting in the context of Christological typology .....	50
1.1.2. Melchizedek as a figure of Christ not Hezekiah.....	52
1.1.3. The priest of the uncircumcised people .....	53
1.1.4. Melchizedek greater than Abraham.....	54
1.1.5. The announcement of the new and perfect priesthood of Christ .....	54
<b>1.2. The holy king and the first priest (Theophile of Antioch) .....</b>	<b>56</b>
1.2.1. The holy king in the holy city .....	57
1.2.2. The first priest.....	58
<b>1.3. Melchizedek as a perfect follower of the Law (Tertullian) .....</b>	<b>59</b>
1.3.1. Melchizedek's priesthood before the Moses law .....	59
1.3.2. Melchizedek as a model of observation of the God's law .....	60
<b>1.4. Christological typology according to the Psalm 110 (Irenaeus of Lyon) .....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>1.5. Christological and Eucharistic typology of Melchizedek (Clement of Alexandria).....</b>	<b>65</b>
1.5.1. The King of peace and the God's service expert.....	66
1.5.2. Melchizedek's offering as the announcement of the Eucharist .....	67
<b>1.6. Christological typology and the announcement of Eucharistic gifts (Cyprian of Carthage).....</b>	<b>71</b>
1.6.1. Melchizedek as one of the uncircumcised patriarchs.....	72
1.6.2. Melchizedek's offering announces Eucharistic gifts.....	73
<b>1.7. Melchizedek's offering announces Eucharistic gifts.....</b>	<b>76</b>
1.7.1. Condition of the Origen's writings.....	77
1.7.2. Abraham's promise, oath and faith in the context of the meeting with Melchizedek .....	78
1.7.3. Melchizedek as a figure of the highest priest and offerings of the New Covenant in the context of cultic prescriptions in the Old Testament .....	83
1.7.4. God's oath in the Psalm 110, 4 and the offering in the Genesis 14. Father and Son, the priest and the offering .....	87
1.7.5. The king and the priest in Jerusalem .....	90
1.7.6. The highest priest according to Aaron versus the highest priest according to Melchizedek .....	90
1.7.7. Christ as the Highest Priest of the spiritual liturgy .....	92
1.7.8. Melchizedek the just.....	92
<b>Chapter Two:</b>	
<b>Melchizedek and his particular functions in Gnostic documents .....</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>2.1. The figure and functions of Melchizedek in NHC IX.1.....</b>	<b>99</b>
2.1.1. Melchizedek's name .....	100
2.1.2. The revelation for Melchizedek .....	102



2.1.3. Melchizedek's first prayer of and the hierarchy of Sethian Pleroma .....	103
2.1.4. The announcement of the offering (6, 22 – 7, 9 ?).....	105
2.1.5. The announcement of the baptism (7, 25 – 8, 10).....	106
2.1.6. Melchizedek's mission in the context of the Gnostic history of salvation.....	107
2.1.7. Liturgy of Melchizedek (14, 13 – 16, 6) .....	109
2.1.8. Last revelation (19, 2 – 27, 6) .....	121
<b>2.2. Melchizedek in the fragments from Deir el-Bala'izah (CANT 27).....</b>	<b>128</b>
2.2.1. Gnostic interpretation of Hebrews 7. 3 .....	135
2.2.2. Melchizedek's identification with Shem (?).....	137
<b>2.3. Melchizedek in the second book of <i>Jeu</i> .....</b>	<b>138</b>
2.3.1. The offering of bread and wine and baptismal signs .....	139
2.3.2. Baptism with fire.....	140
2.3.3. Interpretation of magical names and signs.....	141
2.3.4. The developed form of the baptismal liturgy.....	142
2.3.5. Zorokothora as a Melchizedek's nickname .....	143
2.3.6. Melchizedek's functions .....	143
2.3.7. The drawing of baptismal water .....	144
2.3.8. The offering of bread and wine .....	144
<b>2.4. Melchizedek in the <i>Pistis Sophia</i>.....</b>	<b>145</b>
2.4.1. Melchizedek in the fourth book of <i>Pistis Sophia</i> .....	146
2.4.2. Melchizedek in the 1-3 books of <i>Pistis Sophia</i> .....	151
<b>Chapter Three:</b>	
<b>Heterodox concepts of Melchizedek .....</b>	<b>164</b>
3.1. Melchizedek as the highest God's power according to Theodot of Byzantium and his followers .....	164
3.2. Melchizedek as one of the angels (Pseudo-Tertullian).....	168
3.3. Greater than Christ (Epiphanius of Salamis).....	170
3.4. Assumed sect of Melchizedekians (Philastrius of Brescia).....	173
3.5. Melchizedek and the Holy Spirit in the Hieracas's of Leontopolis teaching .....	175
3.6. Melchizedek and the Holy Spirit according to Ambrosiaster .....	181
3.7. Melchizedek and the Son of God ( <i>Apophthegmata partum</i> and Thomas of Marga).....	191
3.8. Polemics of Cyril of Alexandria.....	193
3.9. Melchizedekians according to Marc the Eremita .....	198
3.10. Did so-called sect of Melchizedekians come from Phrygia?.....	201
3.10.1. Testimony of Timothy of Constantinople.....	201
3.10.2. Method's of Constantinople (?) Oration against the Melchizedekians .....	203
3.10.3. <i>Formula abjuratonis athinganorum</i> .....	205
3.11. Melchizedek in the teaching of a Christian Gnostic known as John of Apamea .....	206
<b>Chapter Four:</b>	
<b>Mature Christian concepts of the Melchizedek's figure in the IV-VI centuries.....</b>	<b>213</b>
<b>4.1. Christological and sacerdotal typology .....</b>	<b>213</b>
4.1.1. Melchizedek as a figure of the priest of the new order (Eusebius of Caesarea) .....	213
4.1.2. Development of Melchizedek's Christological typology (Ambrose of Milan).....	220
4.1.3. Melchizedek's Christological and sacerdotal typology (Augustine of Hippo).....	234
<b>4.2. Interpretations of Genesis 14. 18-20 associated with Eucharistic typology.....</b>	<b>240</b>
4.2.1. Gifts offered by Melchizedek as a figure of Eucharistic gifts .....	243

4.2.2. The offering action in the Genesis 14. 18-20 announces Christ's offering (Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo) .....	252
4.2.3. Attempts to holistic interpretation for Gen. 14, 18pass. in the context of Eucharistic typology .....	262
4.2.4. Superiority of Melchizedek's order over Aaron's. ....	269
<b>4.3. Anthropological presumptions in interpretation of the Melchizedek's figure in the fourth and fifth centuries .....</b>	<b>274</b>
4.3.1. Genealogy and identity of Melchizedek (Epiphanius of Salamis) .....	275
4.3.2. Saint Jerome, Melchizedek and searching for <i>veritas hebraica</i> .....	282
4.3.3. The Christian pilgrim woman in the Melchizedek's palace ( <i>Itinerary</i> of Egeria).....	291
<b>4.4. Melchizedek in theology of the fifth century (Mark the Eremite and Cyril of Alexandria).....</b>	<b>296</b>
4.4.1. Human nature of Melchizedek and divinity of Christ .....	299
4.4.2. Correct interpretation for <i>κατὰ τάξιν</i> .....	300
4.4.3. Melchizedek's assimilation to the Son of God .....	301
4.4.4. Without father, without mother, without genealogy .....	301
4.4.5. Constancy of Melchizedek's priesthood on the ground of the Scripture.....	302
4.4.6. Name of Salem .....	303
4.4.7. The tithe .....	305
4.4.8. The place of priesthood in the Old and New Covenants' relationship .....	305
<b>Chapter Five:</b>	
<b>Christian apocrypha on Melchizedek .....</b>	<b>310</b>
<b>5.1. Melchizedek in the <i>Cave of Treasures</i> and Oriental documents related to the Adam and Eve cycle.....</b>	<b>310</b>
5.1.1. The testament of Adam .....	312
5.1.2. The testament of Noah and the messianic secret .....	314
5.1.3. Shem and Melchizedek .....	315
5.1.4. Golgotha and the center of the world.....	316
5.1.5. Melchizedek as a <i>nazir</i> .....	318
5.1.6. The supernatural character of Melchizedek's service .....	320
5.1.7. Rumour about Melchizedek's death .....	322
5.1.8. Melchizedek and Abraham .....	323
5.1.9. Melchizedek and foundation of Jerusalem.....	325
5.1.10. Melchizedek and Rebecca .....	326
5.1.11. Two genealogies of Melchizedek .....	327
<b>5.2. <i>Legend of Melchizedek</i> by Pseudo-Athanasius .....</b>	<b>333</b>
5.2.1. Genealogy of Melchizedek .....	335
5.2.2. The monotheism issue .....	337
5.2.3. Tradition of Mount Tabor .....	341
5.2.4. Melchizedek as an anchorite.....	344
5.2.5. The meeting with Abraham and the mystery of Christ.....	346
5.2.6. The number of Abraham's companions.....	350
5.2.7. Melchizedek is coming back to his own city; Vanakan Vardapet's version of the <i>Legend</i> .....	351
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>356</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>365</b>
<b>Indexes .....</b>	<b>404</b>

# Melchizedek in Early Christian and Gnostic Literature

## Summary

The main aim of this book is to present and analyze the traditions bound up with the figure of the biblical king and priest Melchizedek, presented in the early Christian and Gnostic literature. Besides the texts coming from the Fathers of the Church's writings also the Oriental traditions, in particular these handed down in Syriac, Ethiopian and Coptic languages, usually poor explored because of linguistic barrier, were examined in the book.

For the first time the figure of Melchizedek is found at the pages of the three different biblical books. Presented in the Genesis, in frame of narration of Abraham's story, the Patriarch's return from the war against the kings of Elam coalition, when Melchizedek, named the king of Salem and priest of God Most High, was bringing out bread and wine, blessed Abraham and received the tithe from him (see Gen. 14:18-20). In the Psalm 110[109]:4 the name of Melchizedek appears in the form of the solemn oath of God proclaimed to the elected king, that he is "a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek". Finally, there is the Epistle to the Hebrews which is only writing of the NT referring to Melchizedek. Therein, his name is interpreted as "king of righteousness" and "king of peace". He is the figure of Christ, the highest priest of the New Covenant and his service has an everlasting value (see Heb. 5:6; 7:1-21). Presentation of the most important aspects of the melchizedekian biblical traditions is offered in the **Introduction**. Review of the actual state of research in the Biblical, Judaic, Gnostic and Early Christian literature was included in this part of the book, too. According to these traditions we can find quotations and large commentaries to the biblical texts, as well as the elaborations going beyond of these texts.

**Chapter One** contains review of the traditions connected with Melchizedek in patristic literature of the first three centuries. Absence of references to this personage in so called Apostolic Fathers could surprise. Such references could be seen only in the Christian apologetic literature, mainly as an element of the polemic with Judaism. Referring to this period is chiefly underlined Melchizedek's priest dignity and service, which is older than Mosaic Law (see Justin the Martyr, Tertullian, Cyprian). According to Tertullian's opinion Melchizedek was one of the just people in the OT, even being not from Hebrews and without the sign of circumcision, while according to Theophile of Antioch his pagan background showed that some right cultic service for the One God had been possible even outside of the Israel's religion institutions. All these aspects portray superiority of Melchizedek over Abraham and in consequence falling under the statute of limitations of the Israel's cultic service, as its final fulfillment in Christ.

Moreover, the Christian exegetes in the first three centuries consequently underlined Christological aspects of the Melchizedek's typology in a spirit of theology drawn by author of the Epistle to the Hebrews. According to Justin the Martyr the mysterious king and priest was a figure, an annunciation or symbol of Christ, and all his characteristics and actions shall find an explanation only in the light of the Gospel. Irenaeus of Lyon used the figure of Melchizedek as a sign of the perfect priesthood

of Christ. So did Origen, who on numerous occasions appealed to the testimony of Psalm 110[109]:4 and analyzed it in a spirit of the Hebrews. Melchizedek in this context is above all an old-testamental sign, a shadow (lat. *umbra*) of the perfection of Christ, the only and true High Priest of the New Covenant. With accordance to the theology of the Hebrews, Christ in his Passion is both a priest and victim, and all sacrifices of the OT were his prefigurations. The Alexandrian exegete considered Melchizedek as a special announcement on the account of the spiritual character of the sacrifice he offered, and the words of the God's oath, which to the priesthood in his order gives an everlasting value. The scene of the Abraham's meeting with Melchizedek in alexandrinian interpretation have obtained an allegorical explanation, which however serves at the practical devotion, such is right cult. A placement of the Melchizedek service in eschatological context in Origen's theology had similar dimension and it was referred to the focus of all beings, such is the return to the unity with the Father. Although in the preserved writings of Origen there is no an extensive commentary to the scene from the Genesis, though an analyzed papyrus of Thura could be a testimony that Origen knew some traditions giving to Melchizedek the functions being beyond of letter of the biblical text.

Generally the early Christian writers accepted popular etymology of the Melchizedek's name as well as his priesthood and kingship titles. In this context they go beyond of dates of the biblical text and the scheme drawn by author of the Hebrews only occasionally. For example Theophile of Antioch seems to be influenced by the etymology and topography of Salem demonstrated by Joseph Flavius. Direct quotations to the Gen. 14:18-20 in this period were relatively rare similar to some specific doctrines. Only Justin the Martyr conducted a polemic with Jewish tradition of the identification of Melchizedek with the king Hezekiah. Perhaps the only original conception introduced by the Fathers right in this period was Eucharistic typology of the Melchizedek's offer. Its first testimony we could find in Cyprian of Carthage and perhaps in Clement of Alexandria. The first one points out that the bread and wines offered by Melchizedek announce Eucharistic gifts and the Body and Blood of Christ, while whole biblical scene has a sacral character. Meanwhile Clement's text eludes easy interpretation, since the comparison of the biblical scene to the Eucharist seems to have strictly spiritual character, and his liturgical context is doubtful. Generally in the main Christian tradition in pre-Nicene period there is no other interest on Melchizedek than this exegetical, especially in confront of polemic with Judaism, and this theological to explanation of the nature of Christ's priesthood.

**Chapter Two** presents an attempted analysis of the traditions connected with person and functions of Melchizedek in Gnostic literature. Their particular expression we could find in a treatise from the Codex IX of Nag Hammadi Library. Fifty years after it was discovered and in the face of the great development of the studies on Gnostic literature in latest time this document requires a revision and new motions. Present text was put through deep philological and historical examination in these parts, which essentially extend our understanding of the Gnostic way of his interpretation. The treatise should be count to the so called Sethian gnosis, being an expression of the doctrines and rites appropriated to the Gnostic communities named

the Church of the Sons of Seth. Melchizedek received there an important place as a subject of the revelation giving to him an important mission towards to the privileged humanity namely descendents of Seth. He is an ancient priest of God, a notion of the true High Priest, the celestial Jesus Christ. His service applies to all of eons, being concerned in a special way on the first and last period in the Gnostic vision of history of the world. In the frame of his mission Melchizedek makes to God the pure sacrifices, by offering him self and division part of humanity designated to the salvation on the pattern of the pure sacrifice made by the true High Priest in heaven. As the high priest of the latter times he is a mediator in sacrifice to the Father of All from whole community elected sons of Seth. In this context Melchizedek seems to be a heavenly being, an eschatological warrior and leader of the just in struggle against the archontic powers of darkness. The treatise could be also a testimony of the identification of Seth with heavenly Christ and of Melchizedek with terrestrial Saver as the two manifestations of divine Saver and High Priest. The document presents a reach ceremonialism giving to Melchizedek some cultic functions according to the Gnostic way of understanding the liturgy, which only in the same mode had imitated rites of the Church. Perhaps the NHC IX.1 should be recognized as a full reinterpretation of the Christological scheme draw by author of the Epistle of the Hebrew: there is connection between the world of divine Pleroma and the group of elected people through the priest service, realized on the way self-offering to the Gnostic God, solidarity in the care for elected people and participation in illumination coming during the liturgy. We have indicated numerous analogies to the Melchizedek's personage inscribed in the Jewish treatise from Qumran cave 11 and with Jewish-Christian apocalyptic literature such as *Ascensio Isaiae*. There are possible some relations with culture of sects described later in the Christian *adversus haereses* literature too.

In the same chapter were analyzed melchizedekian traditions presented in the Gnostic fragments from Deir el-Bala'izah (see CANT 27) and in the Valentinian documents known as *Books of Jeu* and *Pistis Sophia*. The first one is problematic to explain because of weak conservation. The text had a form of a dialog between John the Apostle and the Risen Christ or some celestial messenger about creation and history of the antediluvian patriarchs. It reveals some parallels with other Gnostic texts, mainly so called *Apocryphon of John*. The text contained quotation of Hebr. 7:3, which in the original document probably received a larger explanation. An extensive speculation on the biblical personages, as well Melchizedek, appears to be an important element of this script. Placement for Melchizedek's name just after this Noah's could suggest his identification with Shem, Noah's son. Similar motif was well known in the Jewish literature, such us Targumic elaboration of the *Genesis*. The same idea we will find later in Christian writings, especially in the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*.

The *Books of Jeu* and *Pistis Sophia* belong to the same Gnostic literal tradition. They describe Melchizedek as a one of the great archons. In the 2 *Jeu*, similar to the Nag Hammadi treatise, he has got a crucial function during an extended liturgy. He obtained a magical name Zorokothora and drew water for a baptism of life, which is not from this world. Later on is giving also a baptism of fire. There is no title of heavenly priest here, but Melchizedek's service got similar character. In the *Pistis Sophia*

books Melchizedek's functions were elaborated again. As an archon he obtained a magical name Abermentho with a function of managing the process of gathering and purification the particles of lightness trapped in the material world. Melchizedek as a Great Paralemptor purified them from all flaw and conducted to the Treasury of lightness. In both documents our protagonist gets the trait of heavenly savior. With a particular aid of the Qumran fragments could be noted an important impact of the Jewish-Christian apocalyptic on formation process of the melchizedekian traditions. In this case could be noted also some influents of Oriental religions as well of the medioplatonic philosophy. Liturgical context for Melchizedek's service, his titles and priest functions, the rule of heavenly Saver and eschatological defender, and finally heavenly nature, all this elements make Melchizedek a particular personage in Gnostic mythology, similar especially to the nature and function given to Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews.

**Chapter Three** was dedicated to the specific melchizedekian traditions comes into existence in the first centuries of the Christianity on the board of the Great Church and recognized as heterodox. Many of these traditions went out strongly beyond the traditional biblical exegesis, giving to Melchizedek the particular characters. Some of them are known to us only from the second hand, namely through the Christian polemicists, so their historical credibility is limited.

According to the anonymous author of *Refutatio omnium haeresium* certain Theodot named Banker, a pupil of Theodot of Bizantium the adoptionist (fine II sec.), has proclaimed that Melchizedek was "the highest God's power" (gr. *dynamis megistos*), living in the height. Similar angelomorphism in the doctrine of Theodote had indicated anonymous author of the Latin text of *Adversus omnes haereses*: according to the named heretic Melchizedek in his sacerdotal dignity was highest than Christ, who only imitated him. A confirmation for his speculation Theodot found by the specific interpretation of the Psalm 110[109]:4. Epiphanius of Salamina will say about the whole sect founded by the second Theodot. His followers were reputed to worship Melchizedek as some kind of the great power, remaining in the height and greater than Christ. The same information was repeated by Philastrius of Brescia, Augustine, Isidore of Seville and others. Moreover mentioned Epiphanius provided an assumed doctrine of Hieracas of Leontopolis (III/IV sec.), who identified Melchizedek with the Holy Spirit, using the Judeo-Christian text of *Ascensio Isaiae* in his argumentation, which survived in Ethiopian language only. Analogical spiritualization of Melchizedek or just believing in his divinity we could observe in the teaching of mysterious Ambrosiaster. Again some support for his exegesis was a particular interpretation of the scene in the Genesis 14, the words of oath in the Psalm 110 and explanation given by the author of the Hebrews. An interesting commentary to the interpretation of Ambrosiaster we could find in one of the letters of Saint Jerome, who claimed that followers of a similar doctrine have been Origen and Didymus the Blind, too. Finally according to the Syrian scholar Thomas of Marga and in the collection of *Apophthegmata patrum* a similar doctrine appeared among Egyptian monks. Some of them, in their simplicity equated Melchizedek with the Son of God but the patriarchs Theophilus and Cyril opposed absolutely against this doctrine (IV/V sec.). Cyril him

self in several places debated indeed against a doctrine giving to Melchizedek nature more than human, what we could read among others in his homilies preserved only in Ethiopian classical language ge'ez. Marc the Eremite, living more or less in the same time, confirmed the existence of a community recognizing the divine nature of Melchizedek; he disputes their Christology in extensive treatise *De Melchisedech*, which was examined as well. According to the presbyter Timothy of Constantinople (VII sec.) similar community could survive in the wildernesses of Phrygia until his time, obtaining then a bizarre form of the sect of *athinganoi*. All these heterodox opinions on Melchizedek mentioned up to now were known and condemned right in the IX century by the Constantinopolitan patriarch Method I, who assigned followers of this sect to be rebaptised. In similar tone there was edited *Formula abjurationis atinganorum*. The last source examined in this chapter was a Syriac testimony of Theodore Bar Koni (IX sec.), who had reported on the teaching attributed to some John of Apamea. Melchizedek is there one of emanations of the overwhelming divinity, there he has got a dignity of the high priest, mediates in the process of giving the worship from this world to God, who finally elevates him and gives his permit to enter the highest sphere of the universe. Although this evidently Gnostic doctrine isn't completely new, its construction and the way of presentation isn't analogical to any texts examined up till now. Finally the question of existence of the some organized sect worshipping Melchizedek should be admitted as being still open.

**Chapter Four** portrays the mature visions of Melchizedek and solutions in exegesis of the melchizedekian texts formulated between the fourth and sixth centuries. Main area of the analysis remains exegesis of the fragments Genesis 14, Psalm 110 and especially their reinterpretation in the Hebr. 7. Christological and priestly typology was marked out, and their development was discussed on the basis of writings of Eusebius of Caesarea, Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo. Exegesis of Melchizedek's royal and priestly dignity was deepened as an announcement of mystery of Christ, the only priest and king of people of the New Covenant, which is the Church. Melchizedek's offering and blessing find their fulfillment in sacrifice of Christ continually repeated by the community of believers.

Development of the Eucharistic interpretation of scene from Genesis 14 is presented as a next in the chapter. Although similar perspective has been marked already in the pre-Nicene literature, it's fully developed only in the IV and V centuries, receiving greater success perhaps in Latin part of Christian tradition. In the book were set apart two major trend of interpretation. The first one joins Melchizedek's offering with gifts offered in Eucharist; then biblical bread and wine became above all an annunciation of the Body and Blood of Christ. The second current particularly emphasizes not only the material gifts but also the action of sacrifice, understanding it as an annunciation of Christ's action and words during his Last Super and His sacrifice on the Cross. Apart from writings of Eusebius, Epiphanius, Ambrosiaster, especially of Ambrose, following in his exegesis the example of the Alexandrinians, and Augustine, striving to the synthesis of interpretation, we could follow some of Oriental traditions, testified for example by Ephraem Syrus and Ishodad of Merv, which enriched interpretation of the scene with elements unknown in classic literature.

In this Eucharistic context Melchizedek was referred in the *Roman canon*, being an example for occidentalization of the Syrian traditions. Some fragments of the homilies on Melchizedek attributed to John Chrysostom were analyzed; its relationship with the writings of Epiphanius and Cyril of Alexandria was clearly indicated.

Third part of the same Chapter Four is dedicated to anthropological presumptions in interpretation of Melchizedek's figure and the scene of Genesis 14:18-20. There was great suspicion since the fourth century growing towards allegorical exegesis and there was noted significant development of its literal, historical and critical forms. In result of increase opposition to every kind of Melchizedek's person spiritualization more and more the questions about his human nature, genealogy, character of his service, and localization for Salem were asked. These new answers should be accepted as orthodox teaching of the Church. Paradoxically some ancient Jewish traditions were reached for again. Epiphanius of Salamis in his explanation of Melchizedek's genealogy confirmed tradition of his identification with Shem, son of Noah. Jerusalem identification with biblical Salem in this period was almost universally accepted. But the bishop of Salamis, in coherence with Eusebius, has demonstrated different variants, such as this Samaritan, nearly Sychem, or in the Galilee. Saint Jerome in his research for *veritas hebraica* accepted Jewish traditions in relation to genealogy, identification with Shem and Jerusalem association of Salem. In the last issue a separated voice belongs to the pilgrim women named Egeria, who has visited some ruins of Melchizedek's palace near Ainon by the Jordan River. All this attempts were taken principally to confirm human nature of the biblical Melchizedek, his historical background and only figurative function in reference to Christ and the Church. Simultaneously presented documents give us an interesting testimony of the permanence of so many traditions which began mostly on the board of main current of theology and in the meeting of cultures.

In frame of the mature conceptions of Melchizedek in the fifth century a synthesis of Christological aspects in the Marc's the Eremite treatise *De Melchisedech* was analyzed particularly, and confronted with arguments contained in the Cyril's writings. There were analyzed mainly these arguments: human nature of Melchizedek *versus* divinity of Christ; correct interpretation for *kata taxin*; nature of Melchizedek's assimilation to the Son of God; significance of expression *apator amethor agenealogetos*; constancy of Melchizedek's priesthood; different variants for Salem localization; issue of the tithes and prefiguration for priesthood of the New Covenant.

The last chapter of the book shows an attempt taken to analysis of melchizedekian motives in two Christian apocryphal documents, which is Syriac *Cave of Treasures* and other Oriental texts connected with, and Greek *Legend of Melchizedek*, transmitted between the writings of Saint Athanasius (**Chapter Five**). Melchizedek in both documents has got the rule going definitely beyond the biblical texts. The *Cave of Treasures* in a form of haggadic midrash tells the story of the world from the creation, presenting it as a history of salvation. Melchizedek belongs to the generation of the flood, but because of his longevity he is visible in different moments of narration. In the text there were various traditions on his genealogy overlapped: sometimes he is identified with Shem, sometimes with his great-grandson. From the God's order Melchizedek takes the body of Adam saved from the flood in the Noah's arc and



brings it to the cave in a place being the centre of the world, which is Golgotha. The same place shall be an arena of the Abraham's offering of Isaac and also the place of the Passion of Christ. Melchizedek remains there as a custodian, he lives like an ascetic hermit and serves God in priesthood with worship having a form announcing Eucharist. Moreover the text develops the scene of the meeting with Abraham, which is an authentic moment of the covenant and promise of the offspring for the patriarch. There is a motive of Jerusalem's foundation in the book and this of homage given to Melchizedek by the great kings of Orient. Melchizedek becomes there a prophet giving to Rebecca an answer in the name of God. Numerous analogies to the Oriental literature were showed in the chapter. The document connects Christian traditions with these rabbinic and Gnostic. It has got many variants and elaborations in Oriental ambient too, especially Ethiopian, and some of them were set up, translated and commented here for the first time.

The author of Greek text of the *Legend of Melchizedek* used a simple form of narration to explain deep theological concept. Document seems to come from the fifth or sixth centuries, and even we can't be sure about its sources, it is undoubted that it absorbed and christianized some traditions known in Judaism of the Second Temple period, such as *Apocalypse of Abraham* and the *Book of Jubilee*. Melchizedek was shown there as a son of a pagan priest, rebelled against the father's cult, called and saved by God, living later as a hermit on the Mount Tabor. In the second part of the *Legend* a motif of the meeting with Abraham was developed. This time there is the patriarch who restored Melchizedek to civilization, worshiped God together with him by offering of the bread and wine, and finally received his blessing and God's promise of the offspring. This document presents in different Greek and Oriental versions, in Coptic and probably Ethiopian, in the circle of the Latin civilization remains completely unknown. There were suggested in the book some possible impacts of the Judaic apocryphal traditions and philosophical background apart from biblical and Christian references. Moreover there was one of the variants elaborated wider, this one transmitted by an Armenian scholar, called Vanakan Vardapet.

In **Conclusion** were gathered once more the main areas for melchizedekian traditions. Anthropological perspectives, tendency to spiritualization and exegetical context, especially this Christological, priestly and Eucharistic, are assumed to be the major currents of melchizedekian imaginations in Early Church. A true homeland for Melchizedek speculations is a Biblical exegesis area and rightly in the writings of the exegetical character some commentaries to the Melchizedek secret should be searched. However the book shows that in the major currents of the Christian tradition orthodoxy, as in their fringes, in the first period of the Church grew some speculations giving him special qualities, absent in the Bible however marked in the Jewish and Gnostic founts. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrew opened only the way for Christianization Melchizedek's personage, creating a crucial point in history of salvation from the episode of little importance. Privileged field for new speculations turned Oriental literature out, which seems to be an authentic treasury of ideas connecting Christendom with Jewish and Gnostic world. Circle of the Syriac, Ethiopian and Armenian literature remains an important camp for the further studies dedicated to Melchizedek's ideas in the Early Christian world.