

Joshua G. Mathews, *Melchizedek's Alternative Priestly Order: A Compositional Analysis of Genesis 14:18-20 and Its Echoes Throughout the Tanak*. BBRSup 8. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2013. Pp. 178. \$37.50, cloth.

This volume is a revision of Mathews's doctoral thesis. In it he argues that "there is a textually recognizable and demonstrably distinct priestly succession—an order of Melchizedek—intended in the composition of the Pentateuch and continuing throughout the OT canon (Tanak)" (p. 3). The book is laid out in five chapters.

The introduction presents Mathews's claim that Melchizedek's priesthood both includes a royal aspect and is presented as an "alternative order" to the Aaronic priesthood. Mathews defends this idea by discerning what he considers a "strategic" composition that is evident yet subtle (p. 3). Mathews also sets out to investigate Melchizedek's part in the eschatology and messianism in the Tanak and "to explore implications for hermeneutics" (p. 3). He aims to consider the Melchizedek episode (ME) "on its own terms" to contribute what he considers "a corrective to some problematic approaches to the use of the OT in the NT" (p. 4).

In chapter 2 Mathews outlines his methodology, which discerns "the strategies evident in the biblical text as it has been composed in order to understand the meaning and message intended by the one who composed it, the author" (p. 25). He recognizes that the final form of the text was subject to "complex development, compilation, and arrangement," but maintains that the historical details thereof do not concern the compositional methodology, only its outcome (p. 25).

Mathews then defends his hermeneutical stance at length (pp. 26-51). To Mathews, the interpreter's "job" is to "get back to the author's meaning," which is to be found "in the words of the text as he has written it" (p. 26). Again, no reconstruction of the historical *Sitz im Leben* is needed (p. 29) or even possible (p. 30). Mathews goes on to treat his objections to typology, progressive revelation, and certain understandings of NT authorial use of OT texts (pp. 34-49). He posits a "literal, *textual* sense intended by the human author," rather than the historical *referent* of the text, as a way forward in understanding NT use of the OT (p. 49, emphasis added). Mathews then provides intertextual criteria to end the chapter (pp. 49-51). It is this mechanism by which Mathews observes compositional textual features throughout the volume.

In chapter 3 Mathews begins his investigation of the ME in the Pentateuch. First, the ME itself is discussed, then with reference to its surrounding chapters. Mathews argues for the compositional continuity of the ME with its context, specifically the blessing upon Abram and its extension to all the earth. Mathews sees Melchizedek's blessing of Abram as fundamental to Yahweh's blessing of Abram, and therefore to "Genesis, the Pentateuch, and the rest of the Bible" (p. 69). The royal aspects of Melchizedek are then explored, which lays the groundwork for chapter 4. Mathews considers the ME in light of the major poems of the Pentateuch (Gen 49; Exod 15; Num 23-24; Deut 32-33), which are royal in tone, contain shared terminology with the ME, and are "oriented towards the future of the seed of Abraham" (pp. 72-73). The effect is to characterize Melchizedek as a kingly eschatological figure situated "at the heart of the Pentateuch's message" (p. 78).

Mathews's next section considers the priesthood of Melchizedek, particularly as the head of a priestly order alternative to Aaron's. Mathews sees Aaron's role as "not entirely positive" (p. 80) and even finds a "modest authorial criticism" of him (p. 95) in that he is presented as a "concessive" priest, an "accommodation" in light of Moses' resistance of God and lack of faith (p. 84). In contradistinction, Mathews picks out textual features that cast Jethro "as an ideal priestly worshiper of and believer in Yahweh," and thereby manifest "an apparent contrast" between [the two] priestly figures" (p. 99). Moreover, Jethro's compositional placement in the Sinai narrative, itself at the center of the Pentateuch, "anticipate[s] Sinai and its laws" (p. 103). Jethro's administrative advice to Moses "foresees Yahweh's instructions to the whole nation . . . to be a kingdom of priests" (p. 105), a reality that never comes to pass due to Israel's refusal to heed Yahweh's voice and evident need for Sinai's legislation. Finally, Mathews connects Jethro with Melchizedek by observing similarities in the interactions of each with Moses and Abram, respectively. By a series of verbal links, Mathews discerns authorial forethought that connects the two priest figures. He concludes that Jethro succeeds Melchizedek not by genealogy or geography but in terms of "compositional succession" (p. 112).

In chapter 4 Mathews briefly tours texts in the Tanak that deal explicitly with the "interpretive trajectory related to Melchizedek" (p. 113). First, he deals with apparent links between the ME, the Davidic monarchy, and the Jerusalemite priesthood, which includes a brief treatment of Ps 110. Mathews also briefly overviews postexilic texts such as Zech 3; 6:9-15; and parts of Ezra-Nehemiah. In these texts Mathews sees "strategic crafting" that eschatologically merges the priestly and kingly offices (p. 134). In chapter 5 Mathews reviews his work, surveys further research opportunities, and briefly discusses implications for the book of Hebrews.

This short volume makes for a stimulating read, as it offers many helpful observations on the thematic and compositional unity of the OT narratives. The author's sensitivity to intertextuality is admirable and often effective for his argumentation. The thesis does suffer in places, however, from a lack of detail that perhaps a longer volume could have treated more satisfactorily. Considerable space is devoted to matters other than textual analysis, which distracts from Mathews's consideration of the ME "on its own terms" (p. 4). Some areas of weakness are worth noting.

Firstly, there is some ambiguity in parts of his compositional analysis. For example, in the treatment of Jethro and Aaron, Mathews says that his textual observations "simply associat[e]" the two figures and "[do] not indicate a contrastive literary relationship." Yet two sentences later he says the textual features *do* produce "an apparent contrast" between them (p. 99; cf. 101). If this is not equivocation, then the distinction between "literary contrast" and "apparent contrast" is unclear. Elsewhere, having stated that Aaron is presented as "concessive, not as entirely negative" (p. 96), Mathews then takes Aaron's "negative role" as a "given" (p. 101).

Secondly, one wonders to what extent Mathews's treatment of the ME was motivated by his hermeneutical concerns. Mathews overviews the interpretive history of the ME at considerable length (pp. 6-23), and discusses his hermeneutical stance in detail (pp. 26-51). But these long sections (17 and 25 pages, respectively) do nothing to bolster his

thesis per se. Together with introduction and conclusion, these sections take up more space than his textual analysis. This situation raises the question whether Mathews's claim that "the author of Hebrews was reading the Scriptures . . . in a way that was faithful to their intentions" is a mere "by-product" of his study, or rather its motivating force (p. 35). Mathews states that his compositional methodology "attempts to demonstrate another way forward in the apparent tension between the Old and New Testaments" (pp. 48-49). While this reviewer has nothing against making these arguments as such, in the end Mathews's disproportional use of space leaves one wondering which thesis he is attempting to defend in this volume.

Thirdly, it is problematic that Mathews rejects "any hermeneutical formulation in which the NT in some way *develops* or *changes* the meaning of the OT" (p. 35, emphasis added), yet then speaks of "a progression or trajectory . . . that *develops*" throughout Scripture (p. 36, emphasis added). While he attempts to clarify by calling this a "canonical rather than chronological development" (p. 36), he later discusses what he considers evidence of the "interpretive trajectory" of the ME throughout the Tanak (pp. 113, 116). How an interpretive trajectory can be non-chronological is unclear, unless Mathews wishes to posit a single compositional "author" for the entire Tanak.

Finally, there are instances of question-begging in this volume. As one example, Mathews concludes his section where he attempts to show the connection of the ME to the Davidic monarchy by saying that while his observations "do not prove my thesis they do provide the kind of evidence *one might expect to find . . . if indeed* the ME . . . is intended to present Melchizedek as a precursor to Davidic kingship and the priesthood at Jerusalem" (p. 120, emphasis added; see similarly p. 129 n. 53). Elsewhere he says, "By itself, this observation would carry little weight . . . [but] *if a compositional connection is intended*, it would make sense for the author to include terminology [to indicate so]" (p. 129 n. 53; cf. also pp. 55, 121, 133). Further, Mathews often uses language like "subtly" and "subtle" to describe his observations (e.g., pp. 3, 55, 90, 128, 134, 142). These kinds of statements may leave the reader looking for more given Mathews's claim of "demonstrably distinct" textual features in support of his thesis (p. 3).

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