

In Sketches and Shadows
Hebrews 8:1-6
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My work is in sketches and shadows. I play in word drawings; sometimes sketching the same image over and over again hoping to get an angle of a definition or curve of a thought just right. I play with sacred light, bending it with glass and mirrors, finding the way it casts a shadow and offers a moment of illumination. I like to think that I'm building something concrete, that all of these words and hours and time spent professionally Churching and Faithing is making something real for us all to live inside. The Hebrews Preacher is reminding me today that my work may feel like I'm guiding us all toward a clarity of truth and what is and who we are called to be. But compared to the reality of the Christ, I offer, simply, worship that is a sketch and shadow of heavenly, eternal reality.

I could be deflated by that. I could say, "Why even try?" If the energy of my work never quite gets us to the real presence of that divine dance between Father-Son-Holy Ghost, Creator-Christ-Spirit, if my work is sketch and not portrait, shadow and not light, then why keep making a stab at it week after week, day after day. I'd like to think what the Preacher is doing is offering us some breathing room and a little perspective rather than a finger wagging on yet another way we fall short. You and I live in the reality of the priests and the old ways. We worship in sanctuaries, we live in empire, we know what we can touch and see. We think this is all as real as it gets because this is what we see and know. But this Jesus we follow is like a king and a high priest rolled into one, the Preacher tells us. He has made a new way even though we stick to old ways. He offers better even though we stick with familiar and worn out. He offers ultimate kingdom and eternal holy presence even though we stick with broken republics and imperfect pastors. The preacher has hit his stride here in Hebrews 8. Even without the complex ancient Greek, can you hear it?

Thomas Long comments, "We must keep reminding ourselves...that Hebrews was written not for the eye, but for the ear. Or perhaps more accurately, it is an example of prose built according to acoustical logic; it is shaped the way the ear likes to hear rather than the way the eye likes to read. This is not a theological textbook in which issues are presented in a straight-forward manner; it is a sermon. It doesn't move in a straight line; it weaves, spirals, and doubles back. Making one's way through this section of Hebrews is less like tracing the lines of a legal argument and more like

listening to a symphony. In the middle of one movement, devoted to a major theme, a minor theme will be introduced—something like a single line played by an oboe, winding its way like ivy through the lattice of the dominant motif. In the next movement, however, the themes are reversed. The oboe line now assumes control, taken up with force by all of the strings and the brass, and what was previously the major theme is muted, sounded only as a faint memory by a lonely bassoon.”¹

The Preacher circles back to the opening thoughts of chapter one and weaves them into the central theme of his message: God once spoke to us only through our human ancestors, but now God speaks to us even better through Jesus the Christ. Are you too distracted to notice? Are you too pulled by the varied directions of the world to feel the pull of the holy? Jesus is above the angels, Jesus is the ultimate apostle, Jesus is head of the household, Jesus is sabbath rest, Jesus is the sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, Jesus enters the inner shrine like a priest and brings out hope and joy. Mixing metaphors, swirling and dancing, the Preacher employs every rhetorical trick to get the audience listening. It is in the image of Jesus as priest that the Preacher will play today. You know what priests are, right? You know what they do in your life and in the temple? Well, Jesus is like that but better. They play in sketches and shadows. Jesus is the full image and the full light.

Scott Shauf notes, “The [high priest] argument is complex, but it may be summarized as follows: Priests in [ancient] Judaism must be from the tribe of Levi, but...Jesus is from the tribe of Judah (David's tribe). Thus Jesus could not be in the traditional Jewish priesthood. However, Psalm 110, a psalm recognized as a messianic prophecy in the Judaism of the time, contains the line, ‘You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek’ (verse 4). Melchizedek is an obscure character from the story of Abraham (Genesis 14:17-20), a ‘priest of God Most High.’ Psalm 110:4 thus provides a way for Jesus..to be a priest, indeed a priest “forever.” This last point becomes the basis for the contrast between the eternal priesthood of Jesus and the limited priesthood of the earthly priests.”

So Melchizedek. Who is he? In Genesis 14, we read:

Genesis 14:17-20

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

¹ Thomas Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews*, pp. 80-81

“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.

We don't have much information about Melchizedek, king of Salem. And the one in whose name he blesses, “God Most High” is not Yahweh but “probably a reference to a Canaanite god.”² In fact, the name Melchizedek “in all probability literally means ‘my king is (the Canaanite god) Zedek.’”³

Out of these two references (Genesis 14 and Psalm 110), the Hebrews Preacher points to a priestly line as though everyone knows exactly what he means. That's because the name had come to stand for a character that religious teachers used artistically. Something of a character sketch on which they could draw an image to support their teaching.

Let's be absurd for just a second here as we try to understand what the Preacher is doing with this Melchizedek image. He knows the audiences who pass around his sermon are going to lock into the image and hear where he is going, but you and I do not at all. Have you heard of Florida Man? If you google Florida Man, you get a wild litany of every ridiculous headline out of the Sunshine State. The Twitter account for Florida Man gathers “Real-life stories of the world's worst superhero.” Some of the latest read: “Florida Man Injured as ‘Celebratory Gunfire’ Rains Down on Busch Gardens on Fourth of July,” “Florida Man Left Alligator at Wawa Gas Station,” “Florida Man Arrested for Driving Stolen Vehicle While Monkey Clings to Chest.” Florida Man lives quite a life, and most of the headlines are a lot more colorful than alligators and monkeys. You get the picture. He's quite a character.

A ridiculous (and not quite parallel) comparison, but Melchizedek as a sermon illustration is an amalgamation of priestly images rather than one, historical person. Thomas Long calls him the “homiletical Melchizedek” and says he was a rhetorical device or preaching tool more than a presence in history. “The Old Testament references to Melchizedek are elusive, spare on detail, so preachers were happy to fill in the gaps...It is difficult to determine how much of what the Preacher says about

² Long, p. 83

³ Long, p. 84 quoting Attridge, p. 189

Melchizedek is a part of the standard lore, already familiar to the congregation, and how much is newly wrought [from] the Preacher's creative exegetical imagination."⁴

Every Southern preacher I have ever known tells stories about "a preacher one day stood in the pulpit and..." or "after the sermon, a preacher stood at the back to greet everyone as they left the church and...." The audience knows how to imagine this preacher, and the mind's eye sketches a country chapel on a winding road or a grand sanctuary on a city's main boulevard. The point of the story is not really the king and priest Melchizedek but that Jesus, the one in whom we live and move and have our being, offers us a holy access that no earthly priest could offer. He ends a line of royal priesthood and gives it flesh, offers an exclamation point at the end of a winding sentence, stands before us to receive us and show us life and way. Why settle for sketches and shadows when Jesus himself is available to point toward what real life is?

Scott Shauf adds, "Earthly priests obviously die, so their priesthood is of limited duration (verse 23), but...Jesus' priesthood will have no end (verse 24). This eternal status thus provides a different order of salvation than that available through the traditional priesthood -- the salvation offered by Jesus is eternal, because his intercession on our behalf will never cease (verse 25)."⁵

We settle for what we can see and hold and touch, imperfect as it may be, because this beautiful notion of an eternal priest Jesus, ultimate apostle, great hope and joy that guides us beyond the inner shrine is too hard for us to imagine and comprehend. We want what we can grasp, even if it's imperfect, because the metaphors and promises of the Hebrews Preacher feel like holding on to wind and breeze. We want a human person to tell us what is real and true and right, we want to follow someone else's well-trod path when we don't trust our own, but even the best path of the wisest person is still trod by a flawed and fragile human, just like you and me. The Preacher guides us to the path of Christ, the way of Jesus, the life and words and breath of the one we claim to follow. Keep sketching as we work toward the true image of the Christ. Keep dancing in the shadows as we chase after the light. Don't give up, he challenges, but stay on The Way.

⁴ Long, p. 84

⁵ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1415