In Search of a Righteous King:
A Melchizedekian Reading of Samuel's David

In Genesis 14 Abraham, God's chosen son, is confronted with two kings—Bera the king of Sodom and Melchizedek the king of Salem. Returning from war, where Abraham and his 318 armed men defeated many kings and saved his nephew Lot, Abraham is portrayed as a mighty prince in his own right. Yet, as the story goes Abraham is faced with a choice of identifying himself with Sodom or Salem. The details of this choice are found in verses 17–24, and can be outlined like this:

> **<u>Genesis 14:17–24</u>**
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> **Two Kings (vv. 17–18)**
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> **Melchizedek's Blessing (vv. 19–20)** – Melchizedek gives bread, wine, and a blessing
> **Abraham's Response (v. 20b)** – Abraham responds with a tithe
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> **Bera's Taking (vv. 21)** – Bera demands the people and offers the spoils of war
> **Abraham's Choice (vv. 22–24)** – Abraham identifies with Melchizedek's God and refuses to take Sodom's offer

The contrast in these verses between the kings of Salem and Sodom could not be any more striking. The king of Salem brings Abraham a gift of bread and wine and pronounces a blessing from God Most High. He demonstrates himself to be a king of peace and a king of righteousness (Heb. 7:1–10).

By comparison, the king of Sodom comes empty-handed and his words are filled with greed. To the king who just won the war, he demands the spoils: "Give me the persons" (v. 21). Abraham went to reclaim Lot and his family; why would he now hand him over to this king? Such a request discloses Bera's heart. He is a king of the nations, whose willingness to take from Abraham anticipates the description Samuel portrays in 1 Samuel 8:10–18.

At the same time, his offer to take the material goods is ironic. Abraham won the spoils of war and now Sodom's king, who did not and could not defeat the other kings (see Gen. 14:1–12), is attempting to say he had some right or authority over Abraham. However, Abraham refuses. Instead, he identifies himself with Melchizedek, recognizing his greatness (cf. Heb. 7). He pays Abraham a tithe and identifies himself with Melchizedek's God. In identifying "God Most High" as his own, we see that Abraham and Melchizedek worship the same God (see vv. 18, 20, 22). In context, Abraham also rejects the king of Sodom and his materialistic impulses.

Thus, in this context we find an explicit contrast between two kings. And if Paul can speak of Genesis 16 as being written "typologically" (Galatians 4:24), then might not this story also be written "typologically" to describe two patterns of kingship—one that offers blessing (Melchizedek) and one that takes from others (Sodom). Indeed, because the rest of Genesis is preparatory for the kingdom God will give to Israel (see Genesis 17:6, 16; 35:11) and specifically Judah (49:8–12), it should not surprise us to see this pattern on display in Judges, Ruth, and Samuel.

In fact, it appears that the book of 1 Samuel is outlined by this very contrast between Saul and David.

Samuel (ch. 1–7)
Saul (ch. 8–15)
David (ch. 16–31)

In the book, Samuel the great prophet, priest, and judge of Israel is called upon to anoint two kings (see 1 Samuel 10:1 and 16:13), but the context of each anointing is vastly different. The one is the people's choice; the other is God's choice. One comes as a curse on the people; the other comes as a blessing. And one comes from the wicked tribe of Benjamin (see Judges 19–20); the other comes from the royal tribe of Judah who actually fought against Benjamin.

Therefore, from the historical background to 1 Samuel it is certain, the book turns on the contrast of these two kings. But even more, I believe the book is built on the typological pattern established in Genesis 14, and thus we should be reading 1–2 Samuel as a book that is looking for a righteous king, which is to say, the books are in search for Melchizedek—or a king like Melchizedek.

A careful reading of 1–2 Samuel show us how Saul and David are presented at these two kinds of kings. For sake of space, I will outline my observations about Saul and David in graphic form and then make four arguments for this reading of 1 Samuel,

Twelve Ways 1–2 Samuel Contrast Saul and David

	A King like Sodom	**A King like Melchizedek**
1	Saul is introduced to us as a shepherd who is unable to recover the lost donkeys and who returns home for fear of his own well-being (9:5)	David is also introduced to us as a shepherd, but one who is faithful in his shepherding (1 Sam 16:11), evening risking his life to protect his father's flock (17:34–37)
	Saul is chosen from the people, with disregard to the Law and choice of Judah (1 Sam 8–10)	David is chosen by the Lord, in keeping with the Law (1 Sam 16:6–12); his anointing among his brothers even echoes Deuteronomy 17:15 (1 Sam 16:13)
2	Saul is obsessed with self and displays ongoing timidity at his vocation (9:21; 10:16; 10:22)	David is obsessed with the Lord and displays ferocious boldness to defend the name of the Lord (17:26, 32, 34–37, 45–47)
3	Saul wins battles with the strength of men he takes to himself (14:52); when called upon to defend the nation he refuses–Goliath calls Saul by name (17:8); the command to "choose a man" echoes the people's reason for choosing a king (8:6, 20), but he bribes	David wins battles with the strength of the Lord (18:5), and strengthens the distressed men whom he leads—with Goliath he fights not for prize money, but for the people (17:32); even when tired and distressed men come to him (22:2), he turns them into mighty warriors (2 Sam 23:8–39)

	men to fight in his place (17:25), and lets a youth go to his death instead of fighting for the nation (17:34–37)	
4	Saul did not obey God's Word (15:19, 23, 26)	David loved God's Word as evidenced in his 73 Psalms, esp. Psalm 19 (cf. 2 Sam 24:2)
5	Saul, when his troops were leaving, forced himself to make an offering, because Samuel had not arrived (13:12)	David waits on the Lord and does not force his way to the throne (*passim*)
6	Saul, by making a foolish vow, led his army to sin of eating blood. He responded by offering a sacrifice and threatening his son. (ch. 14).	David regularly consulted the Lord and inquired about what to do in battle (23:9–10; 30:7–8).
7	Saul shows no signs of worship and only builds an altar when it was politically advantageous (14:35)	David worshiped the Lord and danced uncontrollably when the ark came to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:14)
8	Saul threatened his son Jonathan and the kingdom that would be his (14:44).	David made a covenant with Jonathan (18:3) and honored the Lord's anointed.
9	Saul took plunder for himself (15:21) and distributed to his tribe to gain their loyalty (22:7)	David shared the material goods he gained (17:53); "David's spoil" (1 Sam 30:20) is shared compassionately with all under his care (1 Sam 30:16–30)
10	Saul used the priests, rather than obeying them (14:3, 18, 26). Likewise, Saul used the ark for his own military purposes—a foolish tactic already tried and found wanting in 1 Samuel 4.	David honored, sought and protected the priests of Israel (1 Sam 21–22). David protected the ark and sought to establish its central location in Jerusalem. Instead of bringing the ark into battle; David went to battle to find a place for the ark. When he failed to keep God's law in the ark's transport, he learned and changed his ways (2 Sam 5–6).
11	Saul regularly defended himself with his people (15:21; 17:25), rather than defending his people by sacrificing himself.	David endangers himself for the good of others; he risks his life in order to care for others (e.g., killing Goliath and collecting 100 foreskins).
12	The kingdom is taken away (13:14; 15:28)	The kingdom is confirmed with a covenant (2 Samuel 7:9–14)

On the face of this evidence, it is compelling that David is a righteous king, but does that make David a king like Melchizedek and Saul a king like Sodom? Is that something we see as we read the text or is it something the author is attempting to communicate? From what we have seen already I believe the author of Samuel is intentionally setting a contrast between Saul and David, such that the latter is displayed as a king like Melchizedek.

And, in fact, there are at least four more reasons for that assertion.

1. The origin of Saul's kingdom identifies him with Sodom.

In Judges 19 the people of Benjamin in the city of Gibeah act as Sodomites. The men of Gibeah come to the home where a traveling Levite is staying and they seek relations with him. He and his host refuse, but they give over his concubine for the men to abuse. This event unveils not only how bad Israel has gotten, but in the context of the Scripture, it portrays Gibeah as a city just like Sodom. The events of Gibeah in Judges 19 mirror the events of Sodom in Genesis 19.

Keeping our eye on Judges 19 when we turn to 1 Samuel, we discover that the king whom the people desire is from Gibeah. There is in the people's unmistakable irony and identification. This king comes from the city in Benjamin whose reputation is like that of Sodom. Therefore, in the geographic identification of Saul, the unrighteousness he goes on to display is not just like any nation, but of the Bible's prototypical nation for wickedness—the city-state of Sodom.

Moreover, when the people request a king like the nations and Samuel identifies the characteristics of this king in 1 Samuel 8:10–18 as one who will take their daughters and sons, this is Sodom's king writ large. Only now, this is not a foreign king enslaving Israel; this is an Israelite enslaving Israel.

And just as the tribe of Judah was sent to discipline Benjamin in Judges 20, the same is true with David. He is a son of Judah who will come and free the nation of Israel from their Sodomite king. Only David will not lift his hand against the anointed and take the throne for himself—that would be the way of Sodom. Instead, David as a true son of Abraham entrusts himself to the Lord and waits for God to establish his kingdom.

2. Saul explicitly identifies David as "righteous" and "king" in the same passage, which makes David a "righteous king" or a "king of righteousness."

In 1 Samuel 24 David is given the first of two opportunities to kill Saul, a move that would have eliminated this king from the throne and secured his own place as Israel's ruler. Despite the encouragement of his men (v. 4), David refused to kill Saul. Instead, he ordered his men to withhold their swords from Saul's neck (vv. 6–7) and he let him go.

In this episode, repeated in 1 Samuel 26, David evidenced his trust in the Lord and his unwillingness to kill the Lord's anointed (vv. 6, 10). By doing so, David also demonstrated his righteousness and his lack of blood-thirstiness. Though David would be called a man of blood, in his warfare, he fought for God, not himself. Moreover, he displayed that he is not a king like the nations, or like Saul, who will do anything to advance themselves. Rather, David proved himself a king of righteousness.

And explicitly, Saul says the same thing. First, in verse 17, after David had revealed himself to Saul, Saul says, "You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil." Next, as Saul continues to speak, he says in verse 20, "And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand."

While Saul despised David, these prescient words are used to further solidify the nature of David's kingdom. He is the true king who will replace Saul, and he is the righteous king whose leadership will not rest on taking men to himself like Saul (14:52) or Bera (Gen. 14:21). In other words, David is a Melchizedek. And though 1 Samuel does not explicitly say that, placing Saul's words in such close proximity makes the inference very straightforward—David is a righteous king, a king of righteousness, a Melchizedek.

3. David's priestly concern identify him as a king like Melchizedek, a king who served God Most High.

Another striking contrast between Saul and David is the way they treat the priesthood. In 1 Samuel Saul vacillates between ignoring the priesthood and using it for his own purposes before taking a sword to the priesthood in 1 Samuel 22.

First, in 1 Samuel 13:12 we find Saul "forcing" himself to offer a sacrifice, instead of waiting for Samuel to come and intercede for him. This is the first of two events which strip the kingship from him (13:14); the other is when he refuses to obey the Lord in striking down the king of Amalek (ch. 15). Together, these episodes show a pervasive dishonoring of God and his Word (cf. 1 Sam 2:30), a disrespect that attaches itself to all the ways Saul treats the priesthood.

Second, when Saul goes to war, he brings the ark with him (14:18). Instead of learning from the mistakes of Hophni and Phinehas who foolishly brought the ark into battle (1 Sam 4:3–4), Saul again risks the capture of God's ark by bringing it to the battle line. In this move, he shows a repeated pattern of using others (men, priests, God) to secure his kingdom. In this Saul shows how he is a king like Sodom and not a king of righteousness.

Third, Saul's willingness to use others for his personal gain is seen in 1 Samuel 14, when after making a foolish vow disallowing his tired army to eat the honey of the land, his men defile themselves by eating the blood of the animals. In response, Saul builds an altar to offer sacrifices, and tellingly, verse 35 records, "it was the first altar that he built to the LORD." Set in contrast to David, whose young life is filled with writing songs of praise to God, this passage spotlights the exploitative heart of Saul. He is a king like the nations (as defined by Samuel in ch. 8).

Still, the most shocking action of Saul is found in 1 Samuel 22 when he orders the execution of 85 priests of Nob. Because they assisted David and fed him the bread of the presence (ch. 21), Saul employs a Gentile, Doeg the Edomite, to execute the high priest (Ahimelech) and the rest of his priestly household. In the context of 1 Samuel, Saul is willing to reject God's word and let the Gentile king of the Amalekites escape the sword, but here in an act of wicked cruelty and self-preservation, he uses an unclean Gentile to kill the priests of Nob.[1]

[1] Peter Leithart, *A Son to Me,* 130.

From these actions, we learn what kind of king Saul is. He is king like Sodom who will use the priesthood for his own purposes, and one will destroy the priesthood of God if it doesn't serve himself. By contrast, David in the same chapter reveals what kind of king he is. When the son of Ahimelech Abiathar runs to him, David blames himself for the deaths of the priests and promises protection for this remaining son of Aaron.

In context, this willingness to protect the priesthood anticipates David's later concern for the ark, the priesthood, and the temple (2 Samuel 5–7; cf. 1 Chronicles 22–26). In his lifetime, David regularly risks himself for the sake of the priesthood and the temple. Instead of using the ark in his battles; he goes to battle in order to secure a place for the ark (2 Samuel 5–6). Thus, he proves to be a righteous king who lives to serve and protect the whole Levitical system of priesthood, sacrifice, and temple.

4. First and Second Samuel identify David as a new Melchizedek, one who is a priest-king.

Clearly, David is a king who honors the priesthood of Israel. However, there is evidence that David is more than a royal protector. He is also a priestly king.

Early in 1 Samuel, a promise is made that a faithful priest would come and replace the wicked priests of Eli's house (1 Samuel 2:35). The whole context of 1 Samuel 1–4 revolves around the priesthood of Eli and his sons, their wickedness, the departure of God's glory and the ark of the covenant, which the priests were called to serve and protect.

In this early setting, Samuel emerges as the true judge, prophet, and priest. (First Chronicles 6 indicates that Samuel is from the tribe of Levi). As the book unfolds, this priestly promise should be kept in mind. And, in fact, one of the greatest tests for Saul and David is how they treat the priesthood. Still, David's supremacy is not merely found in the fact that he submits to the Levitical priesthood (as Deuteronomy 17:14–20 requires). There are at least four places where David is portrayed as a priest in his own right.

First, in 1 Samuel 21 when on the run from Saul David arrives at the house of the Lord. There, Ahimelech, the high priest, feeds David with the bread of the presence, the bread that comes from the holy place in the tabernacle. Of course, this could be a mere act of humanitarian aid, but as David announces the "holiness" of his men (v. 5), it appears that something priestly is going on. Only priests could eat the bread of the presence (Lev. 24:5–9), and thus David's eating from the holy precincts of God's temple suggest that David might be a priest in some capacity and that his followers who has consecrated themselves for battle were acting not just as warriors, but "temporary priests" with him.[2]

This idea of a priestly warrior might seem far-fetched, until we remember that Levites were called to wield the sword and guard God's holy temple, the fusion of warrior and priest is not so unlikely. Likewise, later when the Lord is portrayed as a Divine Warrior, he is clad in priestly apparel (cf. Isaiah 59:15–20). Accordingly, we can see how the holy warfare of David is presented in priestly terms, a point that makes connection with Psalm 110. In that Psalm, where David identifies a priesthood like Melchizedek, David combines the imagery of priesthood, kingship, and warfare. So too, in Samuel we find the same combination.

[2] Peter Leithart, *A Son to Me,* 126–27.

Second, David's priesthood is witnessed in the evolution of the ephod. In Exodus 28, the high priest and his sons are given priestly garments. One part of that apparel is the ephod (vv. 4, 6–14), which functioned as the basic robe of for the high priest. Other priests also wore ephods and men like Gideon made them, as well. But for all the ways ephods were made, worn, and at times misused, they always carried a priestly connotation.

And thus in 1 Samuel, the first mention of an ephod is found when Samuel is given a linen ephod to wear as he served in the presence of God (2:18). Based on the background of this type of apparel, this garment is suggestive of Samuel's priestly role (cf. Psalm 99:6–7). Next, the man of God sent to condemn Eli and his sons speaks of the ephod given to Aaron (2:28), an association clearly identifying the ephod with the priestly tribe of Levi. Next, when Ahijah, a priest from the household of Eli is mentioned in 1 Samuel 14:3, he is wearing a linen ephod. And again, the priests at Nob are all clad in ephods according to 1 Samuel 22:18.

From these statements, we learn how ephods carry with them a priestly association. Accordingly, when David is seen wearing an ephod (2 Sam. 6:14), his priestly identity should not be missed. David as king is also a priest. Bringing the ark into the city of Jerusalem, which is probably Melchizedek's Salem, the author paints David as a priestly-king.

The question becomes, though, how did David get an ephod? Can we determine? I believe we can, and in 1 Samuel we can see how David received the ephod from his close association with Ahimelech and Abiathar.

First, in 1 Samuel 21 when David eats the bread of the presence, he is also given a sword from the priest Ahimelech. Interestingly, this sword is hidden behind the ephod (v. 9). But even more symbolically, this sword is the one David won from Goliath. Accordingly, we can estimate that this sword is properly David's, but its placement in the house of God behind the priestly ephod makes for an interesting combination. David's sword is in the house of God hidden behind the priest's apparel. Does that imagery communicate a coalition of priest and king? It is suggestive.

Next, as 1 Samuel 22 records, when Saul killed all the priests in Nob, one escaped. Abiathar fled to David, David gave him refuge (vv. 20–23), and as 1 Samuel 23:7 indicates, "When Abiathar the son of Ahimelech had fled to David to Keilah, he had come down with an ephod in his hand." This, I believe, is when the text tells us that David receives the ephod, or at least access to using the ephod. For as 1 Samuel 23:9–10 and 30:7–8 indicate, David inquired of the Lord with the ephod and with the priest Abiathar. Though the text doesn't say, it is likely that the inquiry employed the Urim and Thummim, which were stored in the breastpiece of the ephod (cf. 1 Sam 14:41).

Thus, in these episodes we see how David acquired access to the ephod, which includes wearing the ephod (2 Samuel 6:14). Still, this leads to the question: How does David possess the right to wear the ephod? And my answer to that question comes from the relationship between David and Abiathar.

Later in 2 Samuel 8:17 and 15:24 we discover that Abiathar is a priest under David's rule. Zadok, one of Abiathar's sons, will become the high priest under David's kingdom. But notice the position of the priesthood. Whereas Deuteronomy 17 calls the king to sit under the Law of Moses—something David does, at least in his younger years—the priesthood is now established by and under David himself. It is a priesthood which is sponsored, protected, and developed from David. How does this happen?

If we remember that all the priests who wore the linen ephod were killed in 1 Samuel 22, we might surmise that only one Aaronic priest remained, the man Abiathar. And when he came to seek refuge from David, he was in a sense coming under the rule of David, the king of Israel. As the book goes on David becomes the patron of the priesthood and he and his son (Solomon) will be the kings in Salem (Jerusalem) who set up the priesthood and build the temple. Accordingly, while their priesthood must conform to the standards of Moses (see Deuteronomy 17:14–20), this chosen king now functions as the chief priest in Israel.

This does not mean that David has replaced Aaron's son as the high priest, or that Judah has replaced Levi as the priestly tribe, but as we read 1–2 Samuel we are led to believe that David has a priestly role. Already, we've seen that in David (1) eating the bread and (2) wearing the ephod. Now again, in his relationship with Abiathar we see how David's rule is that of a priestly king. He is a righteous king (a Melchizedek) and a king who brings the temple to Jerusalem, thus he is portrayed as a king who is also a priest.

Adding weight to this argument is the fact that David's sons are actually called priests (2 Samuel 8:18), and the fact that the opening promise of 1 Samuel 2:35 is framed very much like the promise to David and his house. For instance, consider the six passages in 1–2 Samuel where the word "faithful" (*emet*) is used.

> And I will raise up for myself a faithful [*emet*] priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. And I will build him a sure [*emet*] house, and he shall go in and out before my anointed forever. (1 Samuel 2:35)
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> And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established [*emet*] as a prophet of the LORD. (1 Samuel 3:20)
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> Then Ahimelech answered the king, "And who among all your servants is so faithful [*emet*] as David, who is the king's son-in-law, and captain over your bodyguard, and honored in your house? (1 Samuel 22:14)
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> Please forgive the trespass of your servant. For the LORD will certainly make my lord a sure [*emet*] house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the LORD, and evil shall not be found in you so long as you live. (1 Samuel 25:28)
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> And Achish trusted [*emet*] David, thinking, "He has made himself an utter stench to his people Israel; therefore he shall always be my servant." (1 Samuel 27:12)
>
> And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure [*emet*] forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.' " (2 Samuel 7:16)

After 1 Samuel 2:35, which promises a faithful (*emet*) priest and a faithful or "sure" (*emet*) house, four out of the five instances use the word to describe David. In two of those instances, the word again speaks of a "sure house" (1 Samuel 25:28; 2 Samuel 7:16). The other two are the testimonies of Ahimelech (22:14) and Achish (27:12) about David. In short, this covenantal word for faithfulness is used sparingly in 1–2 Samuel and primarily in ways that point to David. Even more, that the first and last use

of the word, promised respectively a new priesthood and a royal throne, give further evidence for the conjoining of priest and king in the rule of David—a priest not like that of Aaron whose service is based on lineage, but rather a priest whose service is based on inherent righteousness.

David: A New Melchizedek

If this reading of 1 Samuel is correct then it makes great sense of how David can apply the name of Melchizedek to his son in Psalm 110. David is not reaching for something in Israel's past that was not actualized in his present life. Rather, in 1–2 Samuel David himself is portrayed as a king of righteousness (a Melchizedek) whose humble obedience before God and passion for God's glory and God's temple is so great, that he is given the right to wear the ephod.

Certainly, David and later Solomon's rule in Israel would be compromised by sin. Both of them proved that their righteousness and wisdom was not total. Nevertheless, as types of a greater king, they illustrate in imperfect ways the kind of king that would come from their family. And notably, this king would not be a king like the nations, one who ruled for himself. Rather, he would be a servant king and importantly a priestly-king, one whose passion for righteousness qualified him to sit at God's right hand.

In the whole scope of the canon, we come to find these truths explicated in books like Hebrews, but it is my belief that the author of Hebrews may have also found these truths in a book like 1–2 Samuel. Certainly, the contrast between Saul and David brings to life the way these two figures model two types of kingship—one is a king like Bera, king of Sodom; the other is a king like Melchizedek, king of Salem.

The point is not without some abiding questions related to the Law of Moses, but as we read 1–2 Samuel, it becomes clear that the house of Aaron and Levi is collapsing, and that God is establishing a new priesthood.[3] Rightly, we need to maintain that in the history of Israel, the priesthood and kingship did not join together, for the Law of Moses required two separate tribes to inhabit those two offices. However, as the Law was given to recover what was lost in Eden, where Adam was a royal priest, we can begin to see, as the latter prophets foretell (e.g., Jer. 30:21; Zech 3:1–10; 6:9–15), that the hope of Israel and the hope of the world is a royal priest, a son of David whose righteousness is so great God gives him the kingdom and the covenant too.

As Psalm 110 puts it, this Davidic son is a priest after the order of Melchizedek and one who has sat down at God's right hand and is now proclaiming a message of peace to all nations. Truly, this is how the New Testament understands Jesus's royal priesthood. However, this road to the royal priesthood does not start in Hebrews, or jump from Adam to Jesus. It develops greatly in 1–2 Samuel, as the whole book leads us on a search for Melchizedek.

In context, David rises to become that righteous king, but David also falls. And thus, the whole of the book makes us look forward as we anticipate a greater David and another priest-king like Melchizedek.

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[3] This argument has already been made convincingly by Karl Deenick, "Priest and King or Priest-King in 1 Samuel 2:35" in *WTJ* 73 (2011): 325-39.