

**The meaning of Righteousness – zedek and Zadok  
(From Abinadi book)  
LeGrand Baker**

*note: Scholars and translators are not consistent in the way they use or spell the words zedek and Zadok, but usually “zedek” means righteousness, and “Zadok” is a name or name-title that means righteous.*

Even though the concepts of righteous and righteousness are central to what Abinadi was teaching Alma, the word “righteous” appears only once in his story. That is when quotes Isaiah, “He shall see the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied; by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.” Because “righteous” and “righteousness” are key ideas in many of the Psalms and Isaiah passages, and because they are fundamental to the whole concept of sacral kingship and priesthood, Abinadi’s entire trial centers on the unspoken question: Is it the king or is it Abinadi who is acting in righteousness?

The word translated “righteousness” in Old Testament is from the Hebrew word “zedek.” Scholars have no question about what the word means – that is they know the word’s denotation. It means “just” in a legal and moral sense. In English “right” means the same thing. The easiest way to visualize the meaning of both words is to define them in a geometric sense. “Right” is “square” – a 90<sup>0</sup> angle. It is the same concept as “just,” “plumb,” and “correct.” It is a line which does not bend, a principle of action which is in strict conformity with the laws of physics, rectitude, propriety, or reason. In the legal and moral system it is upright, virtuous, and correct – it is justice tempered by mercy. Therefore, zedek is a – perhaps *thee* – requisite quality of both kingship and priesthood.

There is no academic question about whether “zedek” has to do with correctness, but there is a great deal of academic speculation about what the correctness is with which zedek has to do. That is, the denotation of the word is well understood, but the connotation is a different question altogether. The difficulty arises from the fact that the righteousness of the king is often praised in the Psalms, Isaiah, and elsewhere where the context is the ancient Temple ceremonies. In that context, scholars cannot tell precisely what there was about the king’s activity that was “righteous” – that is what does he do that is politically, morally, or ceremonially correct.

In that, like in other priesthood related things, Latter-day saints have keys to understanding which other scholars do not have. In this instance, major keys to the answer to that question is in the way we understand kingship and priesthood; and in the way the word zedek is identified in the LDS scriptures as well as in the Bible, but especially in what that information teaches us about how “Zadok” or “zedek” was used as part of royal and priestly name-titles.

The most important of those names is Melchizedek. In that name the “melchi” means king, and zedek is righteous. The dictionary in the LDS Bible translates it as “King of Righteousness.”<sup>1</sup>

---

1 For an in-depth study of the historical setting of the words “zedek,” “Zadok,” and “righteousness” see: Aubrey R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1967, p. 31-53.

The *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* offers an alternative, “The (my) king is righteous(ness).” In either case, it is a name-title which describes the nature of his kingship and priesthood.

Approximately 1,500 years after Melchizedek, the last Jewish king was named Zedekiah which means “The Lord (is) righteousness.”<sup>2</sup> For us, the significance of Zedekiah’s name is that the use of “zedek” in the name-titles of the king had persisted throughout that entire 1,500 year period. However, Zedekiah was an apostate king, so there is no need to look to his administration to discover the meaning of zedek. But Melchizedek’s name and administration are quite different matters. Jewish tradition says that Melchizedek was the king-name of Noah’s son Shem, and modern revelation suggests the same thing.<sup>3</sup>

If one may assume that Melchizedek was Shem, and that “Melchizedek” was his covenant name (like Abraham was the covenant name of Abram), then one may also posit that the name-title “Melchizedek” was a description of Shem’s attributes – that he was the very personification of kingly uprightness – so we can probably learn a great deal about the word by examining his life. We know Melchizedek was a king, but what we know about him has almost nothing to do with his political administration; rather it has to do with his activities as presiding High Priest.

He was “king of Salem” and “priest of the most high God.” Abraham paid him tithes because Melchizedek was “appointed to receive tithes for the poor.” (JST Genesis 14:38) Originally the high priesthood was called the Holy Priesthood after the Order of the Son of God, but to avoid too frequent use of the name of the Supreme Being, the ancient church “called that priesthood

---

2 LDS Bible dictionary.

3 “In spite of his great success, Abraham nevertheless was concerned about the issue of the war. He feared that the prohibition against shedding the blood of man had been transgressed, and he also dreaded the resentment of Shem, whose descendants had perished in the encounter. But God reassured him, and said: ‘Be not afraid! Thou hast but extirpated the thorns, and as to Shem, he will bless thee rather than curse thee.’ So it was. When Abraham returned from the war, Shem, or, as he is sometimes called, Melchizedek, the king of righteousness, priest of God Most High, and king of Jerusalem, came forth to meet him with bread and wine. And this high priest instructed Abraham in the laws of the priesthood and in the Torah, and to prove his friendship for him he blessed him, and called him the partner of God in the possession of the world, seeing that through him the Name of God had first been made known among men.” Louis Ginzberg, (Translated from the German Manuscript by Henrietta Szold) *The Legends of the Jews, I, Bible Times and Characters from the Creation to Jacob* (Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909), p. 233.

Modern revelation suggests the same thing:

D&C 107: 2. “Why the first is called the Melchizedek Priesthood is because Melchizedek was such a great high priest.”

D&C 138: 41. “...Shem, the great high priest...”

The “Elias” who held the keys of the gospel of Abraham may also have been Melchizedek:

D&C 110:12 After this, Elias appeared, and committed the dispensation of the gospel of Abraham, saying that in us and our seed all generations after us should be blessed.

after Melchizedek, or the Melchizedek Priesthood.” “Having established righteousness [he] was called king of heaven by his people, or, in other words, the King of peace.”<sup>4</sup>

That last statement, “Having established righteousness” is especially helpful in discovering the meaning of the word righteousness or zedek. In this place, “righteousness” is a noun not an adjective. It does not say he was a righteous king, it says he “established righteousness.” One finds the same thing in Abraham’s autobiographical statement that “having been myself a follower of righteousness, desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of righteousness.” (Abraham 1:1-4) Assuming consistency, the beginning of the Book of Abraham might read: “having been myself a follower of zedek, desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of zedek.” In these instances zedek/righteousness is a noun – something real, if not actually tangible – something that can be established and something that can be followed.

Another important clue is Josephus’ statement that Melchizedek built the first temple in Jerusalem. Josephus wrote that Solomon’s Temple:

... had been laid waste by the king of Babylon, 1,486 years and six months from its foundation. Its original founder was a prince of Canaan, called Melchizedek, or “Righteous King,” for such, indeed, he was. He was the first priest of God, and the first to build the temple; he named the city Jerusalem, which was previously called Solyna.<sup>5</sup>

Since we know that Melchizedek taught repentance, established peace, collected tithes to help the poor, and built a temple, it is reasonable to believe that “righteousness” has something to do with one or all of those things.

Some scholars believe that it mostly had to do with the temple authority and ordinances. They point out that the “zedek” part of Melchizedek’s name was still in use by Jebusite kings of Jerusalem when Joshua invaded Palestine. Joshua did not capture Jerusalem, but the name of its king is recorded as Adoni-zedek.<sup>6</sup> The Jebusites were the Canaanite tribe who controlled Jerusalem and its environs before, and for 200 or 300 years after, the Israelite invasion. During those years, the Jebusites apparently lived in peace with the Israelites, and Jerusalem remained independent until David took it by stealth. He did not destroy the city or kill its inhabitants, but he adopted it as his capitol, and married the woman who may have been its queen.<sup>7</sup> Johnson

---

4 JST Genesis 14:17-40; Genesis 14:18-20; Psalm 110; Hebrews 5:6, 7:1-3; JST Hebrews 7:1-3; Alma 13: 14-19; D&C H 84: 14, 107: 1-4. I shall discuss the relationship between zedek and peace at the end of this section.

5 Paul L. Maier, trans. and ed., *Josephus, the Essential Writings*, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1988, p. 367.

6 Joshua 10:1. The name means “Lord or righteousness” according to the LDS Bible dictionary.

7 2 Samuel 5:2-16. Wyatt believes that Zadok the priest may have had royal Jebusite connections, that “Araunah the Jebusite” may have been a royal title for Uriah the Hittite, that Bathsheba may have been the queen of Jerusalem, and that Solomon’s rather surprising succession to the throne may have been *because* Bathsheba was queen. Nicolas Wyatt, “Araunah the Jebusite and the Throne of David,” in *Studia Theologica*, 39 no. 1:39-53. Wyatt reaffirms his position, and further discusses its ramifications in “Echoes of the King and His Ka: An

postulates that the Jebusites at Jerusalem had the Melchizedek priesthood, that David got it from them, and then made it the basis of Israelite temple worship.<sup>8</sup> He writes,

In any case, as we turn in the following pages to an examination of those Psalms which are to be our main concern, we shall find reason to believe that, after the capture of Jerusalem, David found in the Jebusite cultus with its worship of the 'Most High' in association with the royal-priestly order of Melchizedek a ritual and mythology which might prove to be the means of carrying out Yahweh's purposes for Israel and fusing the chosen people into a model of national righteousness.<sup>9</sup>

---

Ideological Motif in the Story of Solomon's Birth," Kurt Bergerhof, *et al.*, *Ugarit-Forschung, Internationales Jahrbuch fur die Altertumskunde Syrien-Palastinas* (Kevelaer, Verlag Butzon & Bercker, 1987) 399-404.

For a discussion of Zadokite priesthood, see: John A. Grindel, "The Old Testament and Christian Priesthood," in *Communio, International Catholic Review*, Spring 1976, Vol 3, no. 1, 16-38. Ishida says the whole idea is based on indirect or circumstantial evidence. Tomoo Ishida, "Solomon's Succession to the Throne of David--A Political Analysis, in Tomoo Ishida, ed. *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon*, Winona Lake, Indiana, Eisenbrauns, 1982), 176-177.

"If it had been without significance David would certainly not have troubled himself to take over the Ammonite crown [2 Samuel 12:30]." Ivan Engnell, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the Ancient Near East*, (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1967), 79.

See also Zafira Ben-Barak, "The Status and Ritht of the *Gebira*" in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1991, 110:23-34.

8 I am inclined to believe that claim may be true.

Ahlstrom maintains that Bethlehem was then a Jebusite city, and gives evidence to show that David himself may have been a Jebusite, or Jebusite subject. Even if that is not true, Bethlehem is so close to Jerusalem that David almost literally grew up in the shadow of its walls. There is no reason that David could not have received a Jebusite Melchizedek priesthood. That may not be so far fetched. After all, Moses had a Moabite Melchizedek priesthood which he got from his father-in-law. Ahlstrom also writes,

...according to the Book of Ruth, David was of Moabite descent on his grandmother's side. Moreover, during the time of his rebellious activities against Saul, he once sent his parents ovet to Moab in order to protect the, Sam 22:3f. (G. W. Ahlstrom, "Was David a Jebusite Subject?" *Zeitschrift fur die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 92. Band 1980, p. 285-287.)

Ahlstrom does not mention the Moabite priesthood, but his comments do point out the possibility that David got the Melchizedek priesthood from the same people who conferred it upon Moses.

If either of those possibilities it is true it would suggest that even though the Israelites lost the Melchizedek priesthood from between the time of Moses to the time of David, there was an unconquered group of people in their midst who had not apostatized like the rest of the Canaanites, but retained a legitimate priesthood until the time of David. If that were true, it could

Although David is spoken of as having the Melchizedek priesthood,<sup>10</sup> the Lord did not give him the right to build the Temple at Jerusalem. Pedersen suggests that one of the reasons might have been that there was already a temple dedicated to Jehovah at Jerusalem, and David's responsibilities were to collect the resources to build a bigger one.<sup>11</sup> That was left to his son, Solomon. The high priest who anointed Solomon king was David's priest Zadok (whether that was a personal name, a covenant name, or a title, one cannot be sure.) This Zadok had supported David during his lifetime, and after David's death he presided over the affairs of the Temple in Solomon's day. Thereafter, Zadok's descendants were high priests at the Jerusalem Temple until that office of High Priest was made a political appointment by the Maccabees. Tradition holds that for about 600 years, every legitimate High Priest who conducted the affairs of the Temple in

---

put quite a different slant on Old Testament history during the 400 years of the First Temple period from David's time, about 1000 BC, to about 600 BC when Lehi and others left Jerusalem, and the Babylonian captivity brought an end to temple worship and culminated in a new kind of academic apostasy, and a second (?) loss of the Melchizedek priesthood .

Nephi's later questions to his brothers puts an interesting twist on possible Jebusite history. Could his reasoning be used as an argument to suggest that the reason the Jebusites were not destroyed by the invading Israelites was because they were not among those who were "ripe in iniquity?"

33 And now, do ye suppose that the children of this land, who were in the land of promise, who were driven out by our fathers, do ye suppose that they were righteous? Behold, I say unto you, Nay.

34 Do ye suppose that our fathers would have been more choice than they if they had been righteous? I say unto you, Nay.

35 Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God. But behold, this people had rejected every word of God, and they were ripe in iniquity; and the fulness of the wrath of God was upon them; and the Lord did curse the land against them, and bless it unto our fathers; yea, he did curse it against them unto their destruction, and he did bless it unto our fathers unto their obtaining power over it. (1 Nephi 17: 33-35)

9 Aubrey R. Johnson, *Sacral Kingship in Ancient Israel*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1967, p. 53.

10 Psalm 110:4.

11 "We are told that David had the Ark brought to the city of David, 'And they brought it in and set it in the tent which David had pitched for it' (2 Sam. 6,17). We learn nothing about the place of this tent beyond the fact that it was in the city of David, hence on Zion, the south-eastern hill of Jerusalem, where the ancient city stood, and where David had built his new palace, his 'house of cedar'. It was from there, also, that Solomon later on had the Ark brought up to his temple (1 Kings 8,1).

"When we are told that David sought the countenance of Yahweh or 'the God' (2 Sam. 7,18; 12,16; 21,1), the obvious assumption is that it was in the tent with the Ark. Here, too, the holy oil was kept with which the king was anointed (1 Kings 1,39). But as we know, the Ark was merely a sacred object previously kept in a temple at Shiloh, and it seems likely that David set up the Ark with its tent in a holy place possession. It is inconceivable that, when he captured the city of Zion, he should not have taken possession of the sanctuary of the town. This may have been an open-air sanctuary like those described above, but according to the state of affairs then prevalent in the cities of Canaan, it seems most natural to suppose that there was a temple building in the place.

Jerusalem was a descendant of Zadok – so “zedek” or “Zadok” was not only the thing one sought for, it was also the name of the people who presided over the way to get it. In the Dead Sea scrolls we learn of a later group of people who held tenaciously to what they believed were the correct ceremonies of the temple. They were called the “sons of Zadok,” perhaps suggesting that they were connected with contemporary holders of the pre-Maccabean High Priesthood. However, some scholars translate the phrase “sons of Zadok” as “sons of righteousness” because Zadok and righteousness mean the same thing.<sup>12</sup>

So it appears that the connotation of the words zedek and Zadok are temple related. The words “righteous” and “righteousness” have to do with High Priesthood authority, rectitude, and propriety. Given that circumstantial evidence, I believe the words “Zadok” and “zedek” meant something like “temple things.” The word represents one’s doing the right things, with the right authority, in the right place, using the right words, and dressed the right way. So one may have been said to “follow righteousness” if one followed the correct procedures in temple ordinances. One might “obtain righteousness” in consequence of that correct activity. And, perhaps most important, one might “be a follower of righteousness” by living according to one’s temple ordinances and claiming the blessings promised therein. The Jews’ apparent conformity with correct performances and procedures may have been the rationale behind Laman and Lemuel’s argument in defense of the people at Jerusalem.

**And we know that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous [zadok] people; for they kept the statutes and judgments of the Lord, and all his commandments, according to the law of Moses; (1 Nephi 17:22a)**

If that was the argument they were using to defend the authorities in Jerusalem, the argument’s flaw was that while performances are necessary to some acts of righteousness, performances alone are never sufficient. The Saviour clarified that in the Beatitudes.

**And blessed are all they who do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled with the Holy Ghost. (3 Nephi 12:6)**

---

“There are, in fact, circumstances which would seem to indicate that in the days of David the city had a temple, ‘Yahweh’s abode’ (*nawe*), the place where the Ark was housed, and where David after being put to flight by his son longed to see Yahweh again (2 Sam. 15,25). On his numerous campaigns David had acquired much spoil which he dedicated to Yahweh, and to this must be added the gifts of foreign princes which he likewise consecrated (2 Sam. 8,7 f. 10 f., cf. 1 Kings 7,51). Even if we must suppose that in the open-air sanctuaries such goods were placed in caves or separate buildings within the holy precincts specially devised for the purpose, it seems much more natural to assume that such treasures, here as in Nob and other places, were lodged in a temple building; and it would be very strange if David, who desired to establish a kingdom resembling the great empires, should have neglected to provide the most important thing, a temple to secure the holiness of the kingdom. Hence there is no reason to try to get round the text when we meet with the direct statement in one of the narratives that David entered ‘Yahweh’s house’ (2 Sam. 12,20). But the temple of Solomon came to overshadow everything else by its greatness.”

(Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: its Life and Culture*, 4 vols. (London, Oxford University Press, 1940) vol. 3-4 p. 237-238.)

12 Robert H. Eisenman and Michael Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered*, Element, Shaftesbury, Dorset, 1992, pp. 14,19

To “hunger and thirst after righteousness” is to hunger and thirst after zedek, or to seek the high-priestly, eternal things of the temple, symbolized by the bread of life and the waters of life, and by implication to seek to be in the presence of God.

**And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.(John 6:35)**

Another important clue is that one’s obtaining righteousness had to do with articles of clothing. For example, in the scriptures there are several references to “robes of righteousness” – usually a gift from God himself. Isaiah speaks of a wedding garment as a robe of righteousness. (Isaiah 61:10) Nephi talks about it as a source of protection:

**O Lord, wilt thou encircle me around in the robe of thy righteousness! O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape before mine enemies! (2 Nephi 4:33).**

He also talks about it as an evidence in eternal judgement:

**Wherefore, we shall have a perfect knowledge of all our guilt, and our uncleanness, and our nakedness; and the righteous shall have a perfect knowledge of their enjoyment, and their righteousness, being clothed with purity, yea, even with the robe of righteousness.” (2 Nephi 9:14)**

Isaiah writes of putting “on righteousness as a breastplate.” (Isaiah 59:17) Paul uses that same symbolism when he includes “the breastplate of righteousness” as a part of the whole armor of God. (Ephesians 6:14), and the Lord uses that same imagery in D&C 27:16. When Nephi sees the Saviour’s apostles in vision, he describes them as “righteous forever; for because of their faith in the Lamb of God their garments are made white in his blood.”(1 Nephi 12:10)

Thus it appears that the connotation of the words, ‘righteous’ and ‘righteousness’ has to do with the correctness of the ceremonies and ordinances of the ancient Israelite temples; with it the authority to perform those ordinances and ceremonies; and especially has to do with the relationship of Temple ordinances and covenants to the Saviour’s atonement; and with one’s being clean, as the idea of “robes of righteousness” necessarily suggests. In ancient temples, when people were adopted as children of God and anointed sacral kings and priests, the anointing was done in public and they were anointed over their clothing. As we get deeper into the Abinadi story, we shall discover that one’s obtaining that sacral kingship was precisely what Abinadi was talking about. President Marion G. Romney spoke a great deal about that in the last years of his life. It is appropriate to quote some of what he said.

Eternal life is the quality of life which God himself enjoys. The gospel plan, authored by the Father and put into operation by the atonement of Jesus Christ, brings eternal life within the reach of every man. The Lord gave this assurance when he said, “. . . if you keep my commandments and endure to the end you shall have eternal life, . . .” (D&C 14:7.)

The fullness of eternal life is not attainable in mortality, but the peace which is its harbinger and which comes as a result of making one’s calling and election sure is attainable in this life. The Lord has promised that “. . . he who doeth the works of righteousness shall receive his reward, even peace in this world, and eternal life in the world to come.” (Ibid., 59:23.)<sup>13</sup>

---

13 Marion G. Romney, *Conference Report*, October 1965, p.20

Now in conclusion, I give you my own witness. I know that God our Father lives, that we are as Paul said, his offspring. I know that we dwelt in his presence in pre-earth life and that we shall continue to live beyond the grave. I know that we may return into his presence, if we meet his terms. I know that while we are here in mortality there is a means of communication between him and us. I know it is possible for men to so live that they may hear his voice and know his words and that to receive “the Holy Spirit of promise” while here in mortality is possible. And so, in the words of the Prophet Joseph, “. . . I . . . exhort you to go on and continue to call upon God until you make your calling and election sure for yourselves, . . .”<sup>14</sup>

Given what the scriptures and the prophets have said, zedek was the ancient priesthood authority to function in the temple – either to administer its blessings, or to receive them, or both. Thus when the ancients were described as acting “in righteousness,” it meant one was acting – either in or out of the temple – in accordance with the ordinances, covenants, and ceremonies of the temple. A king of righteousness, then, would be a king who exercised the powers of temple related sacral kingship and priesthood. “Melchizedek,” probably means king of temple things, and the Melchizedek Priesthood would probably be the sacred order of sacral kingship and temple priesthood, or “the priesthood of sacral kingship.”

There seems to be another likely meaning as well. It is derived from the JST Genesis 14: 36 statement,

**And this Melchizedek, having thus established righteousness, was called the king of heaven by his people, or, in other words, the King of peace.**

That is strikingly like Alma’s.

**But Melchizedek having exercised mighty faith, and received the office of the high priesthood according to the holy order of God, did preach repentance unto his people. And behold, they did repent; and Melchizedek did establish peace in the land in his days; therefore he was called the prince of peace, for he was the king of Salem; and he did reign under his father. (Alma 13: 18)**

As I shall indicate below when I discuss the Beatitudes, one of the most important code words used there by the Saviour is “peacemaker.” It is the designation given to those who “shall be called the children of God.” In a similar context Mormon observes that those who have already and will again see the Saviour (What he says is that they “ have obtained a sufficient hope by which ye can enter into the rest of the Lord, from this time henceforth until ye shall rest with him in heaven.) are defined as “peaceable followers of Christ” who are identifiable “because of your peaceable walk with the children of men.” (Moroni 7:3-4)

In conclusion, the ideas of zedek and Zadok (temple things) are very closely associated with the ideas of faith (*pistis* – tokens of the covenants), hope (living as though the covenants were already fulfilled), and charity (living the law of consecration) – and all of those ideas seem to come together in the concept of peace and peacemaker. Note again JST Genesis 14: 36 where

---

14 DHC, 5, 389.) (Marion G. Romney, *Conference Report*, October 1965, p.23  
President Romney’s talks about making one’s calling and election sure are found in: *Conference Reports*, April 3-6, 1954, p. 131-135; October 1-3, 1965, p. 20-23.; April 6-9, 1967, p. 79-82; *Ensign*, November, 1981, p. 14-15.



king of righteousness (Melchizedek), king of heaven, the King of peace are all equivalents.

**And this Melchizedek, having thus established righteousness, was called the king of heaven by his people, or, in other words, the King of peace.**

That suggests another meaning of Melchizedek priesthood: “the priesthood of sacral, kingly peace.”

Let me restate that those definitions of “Melchizedek priesthood” are only my opinion. I have neither the academic nor the ecclesiastical qualifications to give a definition of those words, but that is what they mean to me. It seems important to me that as you read what I am writing, you know that when I use the word “righteous,” or when I read the words “righteous” or “righteousness,” I think of the highest ordinances of the ancient Israelite temple services, and the greatest blessings derived therefrom.