

The First Tithe

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Tithing—giving one-tenth of your income to the Lord—isn't something that just suddenly appeared in the Old Testament laws. The first tithe mentioned in the Bible was actually an act of thanksgiving by Abram (whom God later renamed Abraham). And, interestingly enough, it involved Abram's nephew Lot, the king of Sodom and a mysterious priest-king named Melchizedek.

The original story is recorded in Genesis 14 but there's more about it in Hebrews 7.

Back before there was a nation called Israel,
war broke out across the land of Canaan.
King Kedorlaomer of Elam,
who had ruled the area for a dozen years,
suddenly found himself facing a civil war.
The kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Zoar
formed an alliance to free themselves from his power.

In response, Kedorlaomer joined forces with the kings of
Babylonia, Ellasar and Goiim—four kings against five—
and the war began in earnest.

The armies finally met in the valley near the Dead Sea,
a valley filled with tar pits.
Kedorlaomer's forces were stronger,
and the five kings led by King Bera of Sodom
were forced to retreat.
Many died in the tar pits
and the rest fled into the mountains.

Kedorlaomer's victorious army then plundered Sodom and Gomorrah,
taking many captives and riches with them as they headed home.

Among those captives were Abram's nephew Lot,
who lived in Sodom.
The army took him and everything he owned...
except for one man who escaped
and came to the camp of Abram the Hebrew.

Now God had promised to make Abram's descendants into a great nation
but Abram still roamed through Canaan as a nomad, living in a tent.
At that time he was camped in the oak grove of Mamre the Amorite—
a man who, along with his relatives Eshcol and Aner,
had become Abram's allies.

And when the news came that Lot had been captured,
Abram gathered the men of his family and his allies together—
all 318 of them—
and his small army set out on a rescue mission.

They finally caught up with Kedorlaomer's army in Dan.
Abram divided up his men into several groups
and in the middle of the night they launched their attack.

Kedorlaomer's men were unprepared for an attack of any sort,
let alone one from several directions!
They fled but Abram's men pursued them
all the way to Damascus and even farther north to Hobah,
and they recovered everything Kedorlaomer had taken—
Lot and all his possessions,
all the wealth that had been stolen,
and all of the women and other captives.

When Abram and his men returned with all the captives and wealth,
King Bera of Sodom met them in the Valley of Shaveh.

And soon King Melchizedek of Salem (later called Jerusalem),
who was also known as a priest of the Most High God,
brought him and his men bread and water.
Then Melchizedek pronounced a blessing on Abram:

*"Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Who made heaven and earth,
And blessed be God Most High
Who gave you this great victory."*

And in gratitude Abram gave Melchizedek
a tenth of all the goods he had recovered.

Then King Bera of Sodom stepped up and said,
"Give me back my people who were captured.
You may keep all the wealth you recovered."

But Abram told him,

“I have promised the Lord Most High that I will not take
so much as a single stitch of clothing or a sandal from you!
If I did, you might say, ‘I made Abram rich.’
All I will accept is what my men have already eaten.
But you may certainly give a share of the wealth to
my allies Aner, Eshcol and Mamre.”

Now our story might end right there

if the writer of the book of Hebrews hadn't told us more about
this mysterious priest-king named Melchizedek.
That writer devoted his entire seventh chapter
to a comparison of Melchizedek and Jesus,
telling us that Melchizedek had no beginning or end to his life
or to his priesthood...
and that Jesus is a priest like Melchizedek.

It's very easy for us to fall into a “do this, do that” relationship with God,
to see following God as just obeying a set of rules.

But the very fact that Abram, the man God called ‘His friend,’
gave a tithe to this Melchizedek
before the Old Testament law was ever given,
tells us that the tithe was always about more
than just obeying a rule.
It was about thankfulness and gratitude
for what God has done for us...

Which are the same things that OUR lives should be about, even today.