Traditional and Modern Responses to the Christological Interpretation of the Bible: A Selection of Texts

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The Jewish response to the christological interpretation of the Bible has generally followed two lines of argument: (1) The verses cited by Christians as prophecies about Jesus cannot bear the christological interpretations because (a) they are wrong in terms of Hebrew usage, (b) they ignore the context, (c) the passages are not about the Messiah, or (d) the passages do not fit known details about Jesus’s life; (2) Biblical prophecies about the Messiah have not yet been fulfilled, as is clear from the condition of the Jews and the world at large.


In the section on the plain sense of these versions the selections from traditional Jewish commentators are taken from Mikra’ot Gedolot and other non-critical editions (in Part II the selections are likewise from non-critical editions except where noted otherwise). These are supplemented by selections from modern scholarly Christian commentaries, mostly Roman Catholic commentaries which bear an episcopal nihil obstat and imprimatur. These Christian commentaries recognize that the christological interpretations are not the plain sense of the text but are rather allegorical, “typical” (symbolic), or the like.

I. ALLEGEDLY CHRISTOLOGICAL VERSES

A. Jeremiah 31:30-33

1. Christological interpretation. “God promised a new covenant, or a new testament, to Israel.” See Hebrews 8:6-13: “... the covenant which he (Christ) mediates is better (than the covenant at Sinai), since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for the second. For he finds fault with them when he says ... [here Jeremiah 31:30-33 is quoted]. In speaking of a new covenant, (Jeremiah) treats the first as obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.” Cf. Matthew Henry, p. 995: “The ordinances and promises are more spiritual and heavenly...”

2. Plain sense.

a. Kimchi

b. S.D. Luzatto

c. The Jerome Biblical Commentary, ed. R.E. Brown, J.A. Fitzmyer, and R.E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 327: “What is the exact nature of this covenant, and what relations does it have with the former one? Although some scholars would see a complete rupture between the two, they are fundamentally the same ... the response is manifested in the same obedience to the Law, which did not change. There is no question of the promulgation of a new Law. Therefore, this newness is not found in the essentials of the covenant, but in the realm of its realization and of its means. It will not be broken, as the old one was repeatedly (v. 33), for everyone will be faithful (v. 34). The reason for such a drastic
change is that the covenant has now entered the heart of every member of the community. Thus, the real newness announced here is the new means used to assure faithfulness to it—the thorough ‘interiorization’ of the commitment.’’

B. Deuteronomy 18:9-22

1. Christological interpretation. “The Messiah was to be a prophet like unto Moses.” This view is succinctly expressed by Matthew Henry (1662-1714): “Whether a succession of prophets be included in this promise or not, we are sure that it is primarily intended as a promise of Christ, and it is the clearest promise of him that is in all the law of Moses. It is expressly applied to our Lord Jesus as the Messiah promised (Acts 3:22; 7:37), and the people had an eye to this promise when they said concerning him, ‘This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world’ (John 6:14).”

2. Plain sense. A. Dillmann: If, for the time when they would reside in Canaan, the Israelites are directed away from heathen divination and are directed to a prophet from their own midst who would afford them something which it would be wrong to seek from soothsayers, then it cannot be a single transitory personality, but only a continuos institution which the text has in mind. The same, then, is indicated by verses 19ff., which give signs for recognizing true and false prophets, and by the analogy of its laws for judges, kings, and priests (16:18-18:8).” (Die Bücher Numeri, Deuteronomium, und Josua [Leipzig, 1886], p. 329).

C. Isaiah 7:14

1. Christological interpretation. “The Messiah has to be born of a virgin.” See Matthew 2:18-25: “... When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit . . . All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: ‘Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel’ . . .”

2. Plain sense.

a. D. Kimchi on v. 14:

b. D.’ Kimchi on v. 15:

Matthew Henry’s attempt to answer this challenge is that this prophecy was “a sign in general of [God’s] goodwill to Israel. Of your nation, of your family, the Messiah is to be born, and you cannot be destroyed while that blessing is in you . . . This, even though it was to be accomplished above 500 years after, was a most encouraging sign to the house of David, and an assurance that God would not cast them off” (p. 388).


d. Revised Standard Version: “... young woman . . .”

e. E.J. Kissane: “By etymology the word probably means a young woman of marriageable age . . . The term does not necessarily mean ‘virgin,’ for which there was a special word betulah. Yet the Septuagint was not entirely without justification in translating by parthenos (virgin). For the young woman had not yet conceived nor borne the son . . . It may be . . . that the event is extraordinary, not in itself, but in the fact that it is the fulfillment of a prophecy . . . While in the general context of [chapters] vii-xi there are arguments which favour the Messianic character of the prophecy, as indicated by Matthew i. 22f., it seems to be more probable that this interpretation is to be based on the typical, not the literal sense of the prophecy” (The Book of Isaiah [Dublin, 1960], pp. 85-86).

D. Isaiah 52:13-53:12

1. Christological interpretations: “That the Messiah was to be rejected
personal opinion that Jesus was identified with the Servant in the primitive church, and that this identification goes back to Jesus himself. But this does not imply that the poems are a prediction of Jesus Christ in the literal sense of the term.

The second theory identifies the Servant with the Messiah. By the Messiah (not an Old Testament term) is meant the descendant of David who re-establishes the Davidic kingdom and dynasty as the realization of the reign of Yahweh on earth. Such a figure clearly appears in Isa ix 1-6, xi 1-9; Jer xxiii 5-6, and elsewhere. The king as a savior figure is frequent in the Old Testament and in other ancient Near Eastern literature. Whether the Servant exhibits royal features is a question connected with the Servant as an ideal mythological figure, to be discussed below.

In fact the Servant exhibits no clearly royal trait, and the antithesis between the Servant and Cyrus pointed out above is equally valid when the Servant is compared with the Messiah. No royal trait can be ascribed to him except the proclamation of “judgment” and “law” in xlii 1-4, and these terms more obviously have another meaning here; see the Notes and Comment. The same Song emphasizes the absence of force and violence in the mission of the Servant. The Servant is not the same figure as the Messiah, but a parallel figure which as it stands, cannot be reconciled with the messianic king. A higher synthesis of the two figures, such as Christians believe was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, was not within the vision of the prophets of the Old Testament. Each figure, it seems, reflects the period of Israelite history in which it arose; the king was the savior figure under the monarchy, but during and after the disaster of the Exile no such savior figure could be devised unless it were a David redivivus or an eschatological king. This does not imply that the Servant is simply a response of a prophet to the disaster of his times; the insight goes far beyond what the situation elicited. But such a national catastrophe as Israel experienced would open the eyes of at least some to other ways of salvation than the way of the messianic king. In this sense, again, the Servant reflects the people of Israel as a whole.


5. Details of the prophecy don’t fit Jesus—Abarbanel:

by his own people, be tried and condemned, be silent before his accusers, suffer with transgressors, and pray for his enemies, and die as a sacrifice for sin.’’

2. The collective interpretation—Rashi:

3. Rejection of the messianic interpretation—Abarbanel:

4. The servant neither the Messiah nor Jesus—John L. McKenzie: As we have remarked above, this classification refers to those theories which identify the Servant with a historical figure expected to appear, whether the figure actually appeared or not. Under this heading there are only two theories to be considered.

The first is the venerable belief in the Christian church that the Servant poems, in particular the fourth, are predictions of Jesus Christ. In this form the opinion is defended by no one today except in a few fundamentalist circles. This type of predictive prophecy does not appear in the Old Testament. It is another question whether the person and mission of Jesus Christ are interpreted in the New Testament in terms of the Servant poems: that is, whether Jesus or his disciples or both identified him with the Servant of Yahweh. This problem lies outside the scope of this volume; but it is my
3. Isaiah 11

M. Henry’s interpretation: “Unity or concord, intimate in these figurative promises, that even ‘the wolf shall dwell peaceably with the lamb’; men of the most fierce and furious dispositions shall have their temper so strangely altered by the grace of Christ that they shall live in love even with the weakest and such as formerly were an easy prey. . . A generation of vipers shall become a seed of saints. This is fulfilled in the wonderful effect of the gospel upon the minds of those that sincerely embrace it; it changes the nature, and makes those that trampled on the meek of the earth, not only meek like them, but affectionate towards them.” (p. 845).

B. Medieval discussions

1. Saadia Gaon, Emunot V’deot, 8:8

The view of Matthew Henry, p. 908: “True believers are the seed of Christ.”

II. THE JEWISH ARGUMENT THAT THE MESSIAH HAS NOT YET COME

A. Biblical texts

1. Jeremiah 33:14-18

M. Henry’s interpretation of the promise in v. 18: “For as long as Christ Jesus sits on the right hand of the throne of God, glorified head over all things, as long as he is ‘king upon the holy hill of Zion,’ David does not want a successor, nor is the covenant with him broken” (p. 999).

2. Ezekiel 34:23-28

M. Henry’s interpretation of v. 25: “Christ, our good Shepherd, has caused the evil beasts to cease out of the land (v. 25), having vanquished all our spiritual enemies. Sin and Satan, death and hell, are conquered” (p. 1070).
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