

THE APOLOGETIC FUNCTION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CITATIONS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

By Martin Pickup

Citations of the Old Testament appear prominently throughout the Gospel of John. Since most of the citations are offered in order to substantiate the claims of Jesus, this raises the question of how John's use of the Old Testament functions apologetically. In what way do these citations provide proof that Jesus is the Messiah? To be specific, does the author affirm Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy as a *primary-level* argument for Jesus' messiahship — that is, as an argument that can substantiate Jesus' messianic claim in and of itself, without requiring any preliminary assumptions about Jesus? Or does John present Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy as an affirmation whose validity depends upon the demonstrable truthfulness of other facts about Jesus?

I believe that the latter option is the case. It is the miracles of Jesus that the Gospel of John presents as the primary-level proof of its claims regarding the Old Testament and Jesus, while the citations of Scripture serve as a secondary-level proof. On a practical level, the citations of Scripture in John's Gospel provide a rebuttal to the contention of unbelievers that the messiahship of Jesus was not to be found in the Jewish Scriptures. John is arguing that Jesus' kind of messiahship could be discerned in the Old Testament if one were willing to treat as messianic certain passages that were not normally regarded in that light. The apostle is claiming that this new way of reading Scripture was the true and proper meaning as intended by God, but he is not claiming that this way of reading Scripture was self-evident from the Old Testament text itself. Hence, he does not present Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy as a primary-level argument for Jesus' messiahship. John offers the miracles of Jesus as the

confirmation of this new way of understanding the Messiah of prophecy. In the pages that follow I will demonstrate this proposition.

The question I raise regarding the precise apologetic function of Old Testament citations is one that is seldom asked, but it is a crucial question in view of the fact that today's Christian apologists frequently appeal to fulfilled prophecy as if it were a primary-level argument for Jesus' messiahship and the inspiration of the Bible. Yet if the New Testament writers did not use Old Testament citations in that manner, then doubt is cast upon the validity of that kind of apologetic use of the Old Testament. I believe that Jesus fulfilled prophecy as the New Testament says, but I also believe that the New Testament presents its Christological exegesis of the Old Testament as doctrine that was confirmed by the miracles of Jesus and not simply by the study of the text of the Old Testament itself. Fulfilled prophecy has a legitimate place in Christian apologetics — but only if it is argued properly, which means that an appeal to fulfilled prophecy must comport with the nature of the New Testament's own apologetic use of prophecy.¹ The ultimate purpose of this article, therefore, is to hone the thinking of Christians so that in our defense of the Bible we will make a legitimate use of messianic-prophecy arguments. Toward this end, I have selected one of the four Gospels as a case study. In the following pages I will examine the use and apologetic function of the citations of the Old Testament in John's Gospel.

¹I do not mean by this statement that we can argue only the precise points that New Testament writers argued when they cited a given passage. But the nature of our argumentation cannot conflict with the nature of the New Testament's argumentation. If a New Testament writer does not offer his citations of Scripture as a primary-level proof of Jesus' messiahship, and if in fact the citations cannot bear that polemical weight, it would be improper for us today to try to use them in that way.

OVERVIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT CITATIONS IN JOHN

There are sixteen formal quotations of the Old Testament in the Gospel of John, as well as two instances where the apostle refers to the teaching of Scripture without actually quoting a text. The citations fall under two categories: (1) References to the Old Testament within the recorded discourses of (John the Baptist on one occasion, and) Jesus. These discourses are interwoven around the author's narration of eight of Jesus' miraculous signs. (2) References to the Old Testament by the author of the Gospel during the course of his narration.

Citations In The Discourses

Surveying first the discourses of the Gospel, we find seven occasions where the Old Testament is cited. What follows is a listing of these occasions and a synopsis of the point that is demonstrated by each citation.

- **John 1:23.** John the Baptist claims to be *"a voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord,"* in accordance with the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3 about Yahweh's harbinger.
- **John 6:31.** In response to the crowd's citation of Psalm 78:24, *"He gave them bread out of heaven to eat"* (cf. Exod. 16:4, 15 and Neh. 9:15), Jesus claims to be the true bread from heaven.
- **John 6:45 (cf. 6:65).** In the midst of his "Bread of Life" discourse, Jesus cites Isaiah 54:13, *"And they shall all be taught of God,"* to point out that God draws the faithful to himself.

- **John 7:37–39.** Jesus promises to bestow the living water that was foretold by Scripture. The source of this citation is problematic, but it would appear that Jesus is making a summative statement about what a number of Old Testament texts said about God’s provision of life-giving water in Israel’s past and in the future eschaton. Jesus invokes a traditional motif of Scripture that called to mind the water given to the exodus generation in the wilderness and also God’s promise of the pouring forth of the Holy Spirit in the last days. Jesus transforms the motif by indicating that he himself was the rock that quenched ancient Israel’s thirst and he will be the future fountain providing the water of the Spirit.²
- **John 10:34.** Having implied his equality with God, Jesus defends himself against the charge of blasphemy by appealing to Psalm 82:6, *“I said, ‘You are gods.’”* If the beings of this psalm had a right to wear the title of divinity, Jesus argues, then certainly he as the Son of God did too.³
- **John 13:18 (cf. 17:12).** Jesus says that one of his disciples will betray him and fulfill Psalm 41:9, *“He who eats my bread has lifted up his heel against me.”* Jesus cites this

² For a full discussion of this matter, see my related article, “Old Testament Citations in the Gospel of John” in *God So Loved: Studies in the Gospel of John* (Temple Terrace: Florida College Press, 2002), 28-35.

³ For a full discussion of the subjects of Psalm 82 and Jesus’ argumentation, see M. Pickup, “Old Testament Citations,” 35-39.

passage as a prediction of Judas' betrayal. Thus, Jesus is calling upon his disciples to apply the words of Psalm 41 messianically.

- **John 15:25.** Jesus says that the Jewish nation's unjust hatred of him fulfilled Psalm 69:4 (= Psalm 35:19), "*They hated me without cause.*" Again, the implication is that such language in the Psalter was applicable to the Messiah.

The above citations relate directly to several themes that are integral to the teaching of the Gospel of John: (a) Jesus' heavenly origin [the citation in 6:31], (b) his divine nature [the citations in 1:23 and 10:34], (c) his salvific bestowal of the Spirit [the citation in 7:37-39], and (d) his rejection by his own people [the citations in 13:18 and 15:25]. All of these themes pertain to matters that Jews would not have anticipated regarding the Messiah.⁴ Jewish messianism of Late Antiquity typically conceived of the royal Messiah as a military figure who would save Israel from Roman occupation and oppression — a human being reigning on earth in Jerusalem, and not a divine being reigning in heaven.⁵ Nor was the messianic king

⁴ The best available analysis of Jewish messianism in Late Antiquity can be found in John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1995). In addition, see J. Neusner, et al., eds., *Judaisms and Their Messiahs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); W. Horbury, *Jewish Messianism and the Cult of Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1998); G. Oegema, *The Anointed and His People* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); J. Charlesworth, ed., *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992). For a discussion of Rabbinic messianism, see J. Neusner, *Messiah in Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); M. Pickup, "The Emergence of the Suffering Messiah in Rabbinic Literature," in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, New Series 11 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).

⁵ J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 67-68.

considered the singular, all-encompassing figure of the eschaton; several eschatological figures were commonly anticipated, each with his own important function.⁶ Most significantly, there was no expectation that the Messiah-King would generate such disfavor with the Jewish people that they would reject him and have him executed as a criminal. From all of this it is evident that the discourse citations are offered to show that the themes to which they relate have scriptural support. The citations argue that the controversial features of Jesus' messiahship could be found in the Scriptures if one would read certain passages of the Old Testament in a new way.

Citations In John's Narration

In the course of his narration the apostle notes several Old Testament passages that he says Jesus fulfilled.

- **John 2:17.** The apostle says that Jesus' cleansing of the temple, one of the main events that stirred up the Jewish authorities against him and led to his crucifixion, was foretold by Psalm 69:9, "*Zeal for Your house will consume me.*" Thus, John calls upon his readers to regard the language of Psalm 69 messianically — an unprecedented way of reading this psalm.

⁶ In addition to a messianic king, some Jews anticipated the advent of a messianic priest, a great prophet, an interpreter of the Law, Elijah, and possibly other figures. There was no uniform messianism among Jewish people of Late Antiquity. See note 4 above.

- **John 12:13–16.** The apostle says that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey's foal was foretold by Zechariah 9:9, *"Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."* The joyful shouts of the crowd echo the words of Psalm 118:26, *"Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel."* Ancient Jews regarded this psalm as a depiction of the Messiah-King's triumphal entry into Jerusalem after his eschatological victory.⁷ The passage from Zechariah may have been regarded similarly, though John explains to his readers that the disciples did not realize until after Jesus' resurrection that his entry into Jerusalem astride a donkey's foal fulfilled the words of Zechariah (John 12:16). There is great irony in John's presentation of the passage, however, for the people who gladly rejoice at the Messiah's coming reject him shortly thereafter (12:36-43). They fail to heed Zechariah's charge to "fear not" and trust in their king. The same is true of the disciples whose fear of the Jewish authorities causes them to turn away from Jesus.⁸
- **John 12:38–40.** John says that the hard-hearted disbelief of the Jews was foretold by two passages in Isaiah: *"Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?"* (53:1), and, *"He has blinded their eyes and He*

⁷ J. F. Coakley, "Jesus' Messianic Entry Into Jerusalem (John 12:12-19 Par.)." *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 46 (1995), 461-482.

⁸ In 19:37 John applies to Jesus a later portion of Zechariah's vision, viz., Zechariah 12:10, "They shall look on him who is pierced." Therefore John calls upon his readers to interpret Zechariah's vision such that the triumphal king is the same figure who subsequently dies and is mourned by his subjects.

hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them" (6:10). John interprets these texts as predictions of the widespread rejection of Jesus by the Jewish people. Among pre-Christian Jewry there was no expectation that the Messiah would be rejected by his own people.

- **John 19:24.** John says that the theft of Jesus' garments by the Roman soldiers as he hung upon the cross fulfilled Psalm 22:18, *"They divided my outer garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots."* The psalm's imagery is that of a man whose clothing is stolen by his assailants as he nears death. A murdered Messiah was completely foreign to Jewish thought.
- **John 19:28.** The apostle says that Scripture was fulfilled when Jesus requested a drink moments before he succumbed to death. No passage is cited, but Psalm 69 (which had been cited earlier) seems to be in view here, as well as other Old Testament passages that related a similar motif. A reader of this Gospel cannot help but be reminded of Jesus' prior claim to be the source of living water (4:10, 7:38), and the discordance of that claim with Jesus' own current need for water highlights the fact that Jesus had to undergo the thirst of death that he might become the fountain of the water of life for all believers.⁹ Again, Jews never thought of such passages having an application to the Messiah.

⁹ For a full discussion of this matter, see M. Pickup, "Old Testament Citations," 41-43.

- **John 19:36–37.** According to the apostle, the fact that the Roman soldiers did not break Jesus' legs on the cross, but pierced his side with a spear, fulfilled two passages: *“Not a bone of him shall be broken”* (Psa. 34:20; cf. Ex. 12:46), and, *“They shall look on him whom they pierced”* (Zech. 12:10). John sees Christological significance in the fact that the criminals who were crucified with Jesus had their legs broken, but the bones of Jesus remained intact. Jesus suffered and died, but he did not die as a sinner estranged from God; he died as an acceptable sacrifice to God.¹⁰ Jewish messianism never thought of the Messiah becoming a sacrifice for sin.
- **John 20:9.** John says that after Jesus' resurrection the disciples came to understand that Scripture had foretold he would rise from the dead. The apostle quotes no passage, but he probably expects his readers to think of all of the previously quoted texts that spoke of a righteous sufferer's vindication by God (viz., Pss. 69, 22, 34, 41, and Isa. 53). A rejected, murdered Messiah, who was vindicated by being raised from the dead was a concept completely novel to Jewish thinking.

All of the above narrative citations relate to the same core issue, that of Jesus' rejection by the Jews and execution. (A lone exception might seem to be the citation of Zechariah 9:9 which is applied to Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But even this citation served to highlight, by way of contrast, the final rejection of Jesus by a Jewish populace who hailed him as their messianic king just days before.) We noted earlier that two of the discourse citations also deal with Jesus' rejection by the people: Psalm 41:9 and Psalm 69:4 (John

¹⁰ For a full discussion, see M. Pickup, “Old Testament Citations,” 43-47.

13:18; 15:24). Clearly, the Jewish nation's refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah was a problematic issue that the Gospel of John seeks to address, and the Old Testament citations constitute a major part of its response to this matter.

An analysis of the structure of John's Gospel highlights this point further. The Gospel divides itself into two major sections: chapters 2 - 11, a discussion of Jesus' miraculous signs, and chapters 13-20, a discussion of Jesus' passion on the cross and resurrection. Chapter 12 is the transition between these two sections and it particularly focuses upon the sinfulness of the Jewish rejection of Jesus.¹¹ The climax comes in vv. 37-40:

But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: "Lord, who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, "He has blinded their eyes and He hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them."

John's condemnation of the Jews' unbelief specifically targets their refusal to accept the evidence of Jesus' miraculous signs. Significantly, *the apostle does not condemn the Jews for failing to have seen Jesus in the prophecies of Scripture*; it is their disregard of his signs that brings the apostle's rebuke, for the signs are what substantiated Jesus' claims. The two passages John cites here (Isa. 53:1 and 6:10) are offered to show that this unbelief was foreknown by God.

¹¹ I am following the structural analysis of D. Moody Smith, "The Setting And Shape Of A Johannine Narrative Source," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976), 239-241.

We are now at a point where we can draw some conclusions about the overall function of the Old Testament citations in the Gospel.

THE APOLOGETIC PURPOSE OF THE CITATIONS

It is evident that a major aim of John's Gospel is to demonstrate that Jesus' type of messiahship was discernible in Scripture.¹² But to see Jesus' messiahship there, one had to radically transform the way one read Scripture. Passages not previously regarded as messianic had to be treated so. Verses that had long been interpreted one way by Jews now had to receive new, atypical interpretations.

Thus, the Old Testament citations in John's Gospel clearly have an apologetic function, that of substantiating the claim that Jesus was the Christ of prophecy. But equally clear is the fact that the citations are not the primary-level argument for this proposition—i.e., they are not offered as proof in themselves that Jesus is the Messiah. Rhetorically, the document's entire structure is woven around eight key miracles of Jesus: seven signs that Jesus performed during his ministry, and then his own resurrection. John presents these miracles (rather than Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy) as the foundational verification of his claims. The purpose statement of the Gospel, John 20:30-31, makes this point clear: "Many other *signs* Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this

¹² Craig A. Evans, "Obduracy And The Lord's Servant: Some Observations On The Use Of The Old Testament In The Fourth Gospel," in *Early Jewish And Christian Exegesis: Studies In Memory Of William Hugh Brownlee* (eds., Craig A. Evans and William F. Stinespring; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 228.

book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." Furthermore, we have seen that a pivotal point of the Gospel comes in chapter 12 where John asserts that the cause for the Jews' rejection of Jesus was their stubborn hearts. Yet the reason why the apostle charges his countrymen with hardness of heart is not because they failed to understand the Scriptures that Jesus fulfilled, but because they refused to accept Jesus' signs (John 12:38–40). While the Old Testament citations play a key role in the Gospel of John, the apostle never presents Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy as a primary-level argument for Jesus' messiahship.

Why doesn't John use prophecy as a primary-level argument? The answer is clear: simply citing Old Testament verses could not logically carry that burden. Jesus' messianic claims could not be verified merely by claiming a correspondence of particular events of Jesus' life to certain statements of Scripture. The miraculous signs themselves could provide such verification, since they provided objective evidence of God's approval of the claims of Jesus. But the same cannot be said of the application of Old Testament passages to Jesus. Let me elaborate on this point, especially since it is so often overlooked by modern apologists.

Whether Jesus fulfilled the Jewish Scriptures depends upon the meaning of those Scriptures, and determining the meaning of divine prophecy is not a precise exercise, free of all optionality. Old Testament texts can be exceedingly vague, and this vagueness means that, without further information being provided, many texts are open to various conceivable interpretations. (I am not talking here about the issue of multiple meanings within a given text. That is another question entirely, one that goes beyond the scope of this paper. I am merely speaking of the hypothetical possibilities that could reasonably come to the mind of an

interpreter.) In the case of most of the passages that John says Jesus fulfilled — in particular, Psalms 22, 34, 41, 69, Isaiah 53, and Zechariah 12, all of which are applied to Jesus' rejection and passion — there is nothing in the Old Testament text itself that would indicate that a reader should understand these passages to be speaking of the Messiah. This is not to say that it is impossible to understand these passages to be speaking of the Messiah; it is simply that a messianic application is not signified by anything in the Old Testament text itself, and certainly it is not mandated. Nor is there evidence that these passages were ever regarded as “messianic prophecies” by the Jews of Late Antiquity.¹³ The concept of a Suffering Messiah appears to have been unknown among Jews prior to the advent of Christianity.¹⁴ Therefore, whether such passages had application to the Davidic Messiah was part of the issue at hand, a proposition that itself needed to be proven, and not a premise that all parties in the debate about Jesus would assume.¹⁵

¹³ W. Kaiser (*The Messiah in the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995]) denies this. He claims that there must have been Jews who read the Old Testament in this way and therefore had a messianic concept very similar to that of Jesus' concept because he assumes that the Old Testament, at its surface-level meaning, gives this sense and it must have been apparent to Jewish readers. But there is no evidence that any pre-Christian Jews ever did. Kaiser just asserts that they must have since the Old Testament clearly (?) presents this kind of messianism. Kaiser's reasoning is quite circular. See also Kaiser's *The Use of the Old Testament in the New*, 228-230.

¹⁴ J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 123-126. For a discussion of the rise of a Suffering-Messiah concept in later Judaism after the advent of Christianity, see M. Pickup, “The Emergence of the Suffering Messiah in Rabbinic Literature,” in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism*, New Series 11 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).

¹⁵ It is certainly true that Jewish hermeneutics of Late Antiquity tended to presuppose

Even if one were to grant the plausibility of the Christian exegesis of these passages — namely that passages like Psalms 22, 34, 41, 69, Isaiah 53, Zechariah 12, et al., did foretell an eschatological figure who would be betrayed, rejected, and slain — other persons besides the messianic king could be proffered as the potential referent of the prophecy. The so-called Teacher of Righteousness, the leader of the Jewish sect associated with Qumran, himself cited Psalm 41:19 (“He who eats my bread has lifted up his heel against me”) to speak of his betrayal by a friend (1QH 5:23–24), just as Jesus does to speak of his betrayal by Judas (John 13:18).¹⁶ The Teacher of Righteousness also applied to himself much of the wording of Psalm 22 (1QH 5:5–19), just as John applies this psalm to Jesus.¹⁷ One might aver that the language of Psalm 22 serves as a fitting description of the plight of a crucifixion victim (which it does), but the psalm does not have to be read that way, and pre-Christian Jewish exegetes did not do

that, on some level of meaning, any portion of Scripture might have potential eschatological reference. (See J. Neusner, *What Is Midrash?* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987], 95-105.) But this pertains to fundamental hermeneutic methodology; it does not establish that a messianic application of any given passages was valid in point of fact. The mere claim by John or anyone else that a passage of Scripture spoke of the future messianic king would not prove that such was necessarily the case (unless the claimant’s inspiration was already granted).

¹⁶ Some scholars have claimed that the Teacher of Righteousness’ use of such passages indicates that he claimed to be a suffering-Messiah figure a century before Jesus did (e.g. Michael O. Wise, *The First Messiah: Investigating The Savior Before Christ* [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1999]). But Wise and others go far beyond the data when they assert that this individual claimed messianic status. There is no evidence that this was the case.

¹⁷ R. Brown, *Death Of The Messiah*, 2.1459.

so. Also, the sectarian literature at Qumran never applies Isaiah 53 to the messianic king; it instead uses the words of Isaiah 53 to describe the suffering of the Teacher of Righteousness (1QH 8:27). Turning to the Rabbinic documents, we see that Rabbinic Jews sometimes applied Isaiah 53 to Rabbi Akiba, a man who underwent imprisonment and death during Rome's persecution of Jews in the second century (*y. Sheq. 5:1; b. Ber. 61b*). But no one ever claimed that Akiba was the Messiah.¹⁸ And if we look objectively at Zechariah 12:10 and its statements about one who is "pierced," there is nothing in its literary context that necessitates the idea that this individual is himself the Davidic Messiah. Hypothetically, another figure might be in view — which is exactly how Rabbinic Jews understood this prophecy. They commonly interpreted Zechariah 12:10 as a prediction of a second messianic figure, one from the tribe of Ephraim whom they called Messiah ben Joseph (*y. Suk 5:2; b. Suk 52a*).¹⁹

It is interesting, of course, that the Rabbinic writings (3rd–7th centuries) do apply to the Davidic Messiah some of the very passages that John treats messianically, including Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22.²⁰ But a messianic application of these passages does not necessitate the precise exegesis that John's Gospel gives to them. The rabbis gave these passages other

¹⁸ According to *y. Taanit 4:7*, Akiba himself claimed that Simon Bar Kokhba was the Messiah (until the Romans quelled Bar Kokhba's rebellion).

¹⁹ See M. Pickup, "The Emergence of the Suffering Messiah in Rabbinic Literature," 144-150.

²⁰ See M. Pickup, "The Emergence of the Suffering Messiah in Rabbinic Literature."

interpretations that, in and of themselves, were hypothetically plausible. For example, the rabbis did not understand Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 to refer to a *dying* Messiah. They interpreted these texts to be speaking of the Davidic Messiah's suffering of sickness or persecution, but not a suffering that resulted in his death (*Ruth Rab.* 40:5; *b. San.* 98b; *Pesiq. Rab.* 31-36).²¹

In light of the above, we see that in the case of some of the key passages cited in the Gospel of John, the issue of whether they were intended by God as messianic prophecies is something that could not be determined simply by reading them in their Old Testament contexts apart from any other information. Nor, as we have observed, does John argue that such was the case. The *miracles* of Jesus are what John presents as the primary proof of the messianic interpretation of these Old Testament texts and their fulfillment by Jesus. The miracles verified that Jesus' messianic claim — as well as the Christological interpretation of Scripture that he and his apostles put forth — had the imprimatur of God.²²

Let me emphasize again that I am not suggesting the Old Testament citations in John's Gospel have no valid apologetic role. I am saying that the citations and John's Christological interpretation of them necessarily depend upon the evidence of Jesus' miracles for verification.

²¹ The LXX seems to minimize the language that might suggest that the sufferer of Isaiah 53 dies. See David A. Sapp's analysis in "LXX, 1QIsa, And MT Versions Of Isaiah 53 And The Christian Doctrine Of Atonement," in *Jesus And The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 And Christian Origins* (eds., William H. Bellinger, Jr. and William R. Farmer; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 170–192.

²² Even when Jesus argued his right to equate himself with God on the basis of Psalm 82, he still appealed to his miraculous works as the primary verification. See John 10:37–38.

Thus, the citations provide only a secondary-level argument in support of Jesus' claims. Yet it is, nonetheless, a very important secondary-level argument. For if Jesus truly was the Messiah of prophecy, then he had to fit what the Scriptures depicted about such a figure. The author of the Gospel knew that it was on this very point that the claims of Jesus met opposition, since the kind of messianic figure Jesus represented was not at all in line with the picture of the Messiah that the Jews derived from their reading of Scripture. Jesus of Nazareth was antithetical to Jewish messianic expectations at nearly every point. Most of all, there was no expectation that the coming Messiah would generate such disfavor with his own people that they would execute him as a criminal. Simply put, the events of Jesus' life were so discordant with Jewish messianic assumptions that it seemed impossible for Jesus to be whom he claimed to be.

I affirm, therefore, that one of the tasks of the Gospel of John is to counter this argument against the messiahship of Jesus by proposing another way of reading the Scriptures, one that was markedly different from the way the Scriptures had been read before. This new approach was first offered by Jesus himself during his ministry, as John makes clear in his record of Jesus' discourses. As we saw earlier, the citations of Scripture in the discourses of the Gospel address the most controversial affirmations that Jesus made about himself, viz. his heavenly origin (6:31–65), his divine nature (10:34), his salvific sending of the Holy Spirit (7:37–39), and his unjust betrayal and rejection (13:18; 15:25). In the citations located in the narrative portions of the Gospel, the issue of Jesus' rejection and execution comes to the forefront (2:17; 12:38–40; 19:24; 19:28; 19:36–37; 20:9). All of the narrative citations are intended to show that the most objectionable issue about Jesus had been

adumbrated by the Scriptures. His rejection by the Jewish people and subsequent martyrdom were in accordance with God's eternal plan (7:39, 12:16, 23; 13:31; 17:1).

John is arguing that Christianity's presentation of a rejected, suffering Messiah fit the template of Scripture and fit it better than did the Jewish concept of a non-suffering king who would be well-received by his people. The Jewish concept ignored one key element in the Old Testament paradigm: it did not apply to the Messiah those passages of Scripture that spoke of a righteous sufferer and martyr. Only passages evoking positive images were deemed by Jews to be legitimate messianic adumbrations, e.g., images of an ideal king, warrior, or judge. John argues, in effect, that passages like Psalms 22, 34, 41, 69, Isaiah 53, and Zechariah 12 should not be ignored when formulating one's idea of the Messiah. The apostle offers a less truncated way of reading Scripture messianically, one wherein the Messiah of prophecy is understood to be someone who will be rejected by his own people and die as an atonement for sin before assuming his position of royal glory. In short, John argues that the events of Jesus' life provided not only a plausible model for what the Scriptures meant, but a model that fit the full content of Scripture better than any other model.²³

Still, this way of understanding the Scriptures was not readily apparent to a reader of the Old Testament — a fact attested by the failure of the Jews and even the disciples of Jesus to anticipate the kind of Messiah Jesus was. But John's Gospel presents Jesus as the key that

²³ While this paper has focused upon John's Gospel, the same point can be made about the apologetic purpose of the citations in the Gospel of Matthew. See M. Pickup, "Yesterday, Today and Forever: An Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew," in *Jesus For A New Millennium* [Florida College Lectures 2001] (Temple Terrace: Florida College Bookstore, 2001), 11-17.

can unlock the real meaning of Scripture. At several points the author speaks to his readers about his own personal realization of Jesus' fulfillment of Scripture: John tells how, after Jesus' resurrection, he and the other disciples came to understand (1) how the Psalter's depiction of one who is persecuted because of zeal for the temple served as a description of what happened to Jesus (2:17); (2) how Zechariah's vision of a king's advent on a donkey's colt presaged the triumphal entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem just days before his people turned against him (12:13); and (3) how the passages that spoke of the vindication of a righteous sufferer were adumbrations of the death and resurrection of Jesus (20:9). By discussing his own realization of how the Scriptures spoke of Jesus, the author of this Gospel exemplifies the journey of enlightenment that he wants all readers of the Old Testament to take.

The use of Old Testament citations in John's Gospel serves to radically transform the way one reads the Old Testament as a whole. As one considers each citation, a level of meaning opens up wherein the underlying message of the Old Testament comes to be seen as the foretelling of a singular figure: a divine agent of God who would suffer as a righteous servant even to the point of death, and then be raised to royal glory. Thus, Jesus becomes the focal point of God's past revelation. By looking at what was written beforehand in terms of Jesus' life, one now sees him on page after page of the Old Testament. The Jewish Scriptures become Christ. The word becomes flesh.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT MESSIANIC PROPHECY IN CURRENT APOLOGETICS

Some readers of the New Testament may object to my contention that the messianic meaning of certain Old Testament passages could not have been recognized prior to Christ's advent. The New Testament asserts that the messiahship of Jesus was foretold in Scripture, and this assertion is commonly taken to mean that ancient Jews should have anticipated the very kind of Messiah that Jesus claimed to be. It is claimed that the New Testament makes this point when it rebukes the Jews for rejecting Jesus and for failing to believe their own Scriptures. Walter Kaiser, for example, points to Luke 24:25-27 where Jesus, after his resurrection, criticized the two disciples on the road to Emmaus for their scepticism:

And He said to them, "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

Kaiser understands this passage to say that "Jesus roundly rebuked the two on the road to Emmaus for not knowing what they ought to have realized from reading the OT."²⁴ He says further, "They could and should have known these things from the Scriptures, but they were 'fools' and 'slow of heart' when they refused to listen to the OT itself."²⁵

But Kaiser could not be more wrong. The immediately preceding verses indicate that these disciples were chastised for failing to believe the testimony of the eyewitnesses

²⁴ W. Kaiser, *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 230.

²⁵ W. Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, 110.

concerning Jesus' resurrection (vv. 18-24). Jesus had explained earlier to his band of followers that he would be rejected by the people of Jerusalem, be put to death, and rise again (Luke 9:22; 8:31-34). But his disciples had continually disbelieved this prediction. Now that Jesus had risen and these two disciples had heard reports about the empty tomb and his appearances, they still remained incredulous. Nothing in this passage is suggesting that the disciples were at fault for not understanding the concept of a rejected, dying Messiah from the outset—that is, from a mere reading of the Old Testament alone. Furthermore, our analysis of John's apologetic use of Old Testament citations argues against seeing the Lukan passage as Kaiser does. I affirm that Luke is not offering the fulfillment of prophecy as a primary-level argument for Jesus' messiahship any more than John's Gospel does. The miracles of Jesus, and ultimately the resurrection miracle, were the primary confirmation of Jesus' claims about himself and about the meaning of the Jewish Scriptures.

Let me stress this point further. Luke 24:44-47 says,

Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem."

There are two hypothetical ways of understanding Jesus' role in the above passage: (1) He was explaining the Old Testament to people who could and should have been able to discern his kind of messiahship in the pages of Scripture, but did not. In this case, Jesus' role would be nothing more than that of an unprejudiced exegete of Scripture. (2) He was revealing the plan of God that the Scriptures had adumbrated but had not fully unfolded. In this case, Jesus'

role is that of an explicator of God's promises, a prophet par excellence who gives the ultimate revelation from God. Contrary to Kaiser and others, the apologetic use of the Old Testament in the Gospel of John argues that the second option is correct.

Kaiser fails to consider this second possibility. He asks, "Of what value would the claims of the NT evangelists and apostles be if the original OT meanings did not anticipate in some adequate way what eventually took place during the days of Jesus of Nazareth?"²⁶ He asks the right question, but he gives the wrong answer. Kaiser assumes there could be no value in the New Testament's appeal to the Old Testament unless the Old Testament on its own could necessarily yield to its readers, apart from any explication by Jesus or his apostles, the meanings the New Testament assigns. Thus, he assumes that unless the New Testament's apologetic use of the Old Testament functions as a primary-level argument, it can have no valid apologetic function. But Kaiser's thinking reflects his own theological presuppositions and not the evidence of the New Testament itself. The Old Testament did "anticipate" the messiahship of Jesus, but not explicitly in all aspects of that messiahship, and not so that Old Testament readers would understand the intention of God ahead-of-time. Rather, the kind of messiahship that Jesus manifested was one that lay hidden, as it were, within the pages of the Old Testament — a mystery to be unfolded with the coming of Jesus himself.

"But," some would ask, "didn't the apostle Paul teach that stubbornness is what prevented the Jews from understanding the Scriptures?" Yes, but there is more to it than that.

²⁶ W. Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, 28.

In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul stated the following about the inability of his Jewish kinsmen to understand the Scriptures:

Their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away (vv. 14-16).

Paul certainly blames the Jews' failure to see the real meaning of the Jewish Scriptures on their hardness of heart. But he adds that their hardened heart caused the veil of the Mosaic Law to "remain unlifted." He does not say that their hardened heart *was* the veil. Their heart is what prevented the veil from being removed. If it were true that the messianism of the Old Testament could have been fully understood by reading the Jewish Scriptures alone — i.e., without Jesus' elaboration — then this would mean that an understanding of the Scriptures did not absolutely require a prior belief in Jesus; the veil could be lifted apart from Christ. But Paul explicitly says that the veil "is removed in Christ," and that "whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away." So Christ's elucidation of the Scriptures was absolutely necessary for one to grasp the meaning of the Scriptures. This was always God's plan. The problem was that the stubbornness of the Jews prevented them from accepting Jesus' elucidation.

What we have seen with regard to John's use of Old Testament citations is echoed by other New Testament passages: an appeal to fulfilled prophecy is not used as an argument that can prove, in itself, that Jesus is the Messiah of prophecy. For one to understand the underlying message of the Old Testament, one must come to Jesus and accept him as the one

who can explain the Scriptures to us. His miracles provide the foundational proof of the correctness of Jesus' explanation of Scripture.

Misuse of Messianic Prophecy

Our discussion above reveals the fundamental problem with the fulfilled-prophecy argumentation of most Christian apologists today. Seeking to convince people of the fact that Jesus is the Son of God and that the Bible is His word, well-intentioned apologists list passage after passage and assert that they are messianic prophecies Jesus fulfilled. They ask, "How could one man fulfill all of these prophecies unless he was the Messiah? Jesus' fulfillment of these prophecies proves that he is the Son of God and the Bible is inspired of God!" Books that make such arguments are legion. The following excerpt from the preface of one popular source, John Ankerberg's *The Case For Jesus The Messiah*, well illustrates the approach.

Is there evidence in history that God gave specific information hundreds of years in advance about a person He knew would live? What specific accounts are given and where can they be found? ... Do these prophecies constitute solid evidence for us today? Is it possible for us to account for this information apart from the fact that it must have come from God? ... These prophecies are like clues in a mystery story. In this book we will try to gather enough clues to identify the special person who is talked about in the Hebrew Scriptures ... If the prophecies are truly fulfilled, then the Bible has given information about the future that could only have come from God. Our goal will be to examine a handful of the many prophetic statements and explain why anyone who looks at the clear meaning of the words will realize these verses all point to a future Person.²⁷

²⁷ John A. Ankerberg, *The Case For Jesus The Messiah* (Eugene, Or: Harvest House, 1989), ix-x. The same approach is seen in Paul Little, *Know Why You Believe* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 67-71; in the entirety of Abram Abraham, *New Testament Fulfillment of Old Testament Prophecies* (Westwood, NJ: Barbour Books, 1988); W. Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, as well as many other popular books dealing with Christian apologetics.

The fallacy here is that the entire argument hinges upon whether the unique Christian meanings assigned to these passages are a correct explanation of them. Yet in the case of many of the cited passages, one would have no reason to accept the Christian reading as correct *simply by reading the Old Testament passages alone*.²⁸ The fact is that reading the Old Testament apart from any New Testament explication does not demand this kind of messianic idea, nor would it even necessarily come to one's mind. The Old Testament was neither that detailed nor that explicit in its presentation of messianic doctrine. This is the reason why, prior to the emergence of Christianity, no Jew understood the Old Testament to speak about a Suffering Messiah. Nor did any Jew ever think of the Messiah of prophecy as the all-encompassing figure of the eschaton who himself would bring all of God's promises to fruition. The text of the Old Testament did not spell out this kind of messianism, and there is no evidence that anyone before the advent of Christianity ever read the Old Testament as if it did.

I am aware that many Christian apologists will bristle at these assertions of mine. This is because they are so used to looking at the Old Testament through the lenses of Christianity that they think the Old Testament on its own accord conveys that conception with clarity. They think that any reader of the Old Testament should be able to see, as they do, that the ancient Scriptures clearly spoke of a single future figure, the Davidic Messiah, who would

²⁸ Christian apologists are repeatedly guilty of (1) arguing that first-century Jews regarded certain passages (like Psa. 22 or Isa. 53) as messianic on the basis of later Rabbinic statements about these passages — a very flawed methodology; and (2) assuming even in such cases that the New Testament and Rabbinic concepts of “Messiah” are basically equivalent. See e.g., John Ankerberg's *The Case For Jesus The Messiah*, 39-40 *et passim*.

personally accomplish all of God's promises by means of his own death and resurrection. Christian apologists who think this way are so used to the Christian spectacles they wear that they forget they are wearing them.²⁹

These Christian apologists approach the subject of messianic prophecy as if it were intended by God as a primary-level argument for Jesus' messiahship. They assert a Christological interpretation of many Old Testament passages as if a grammatical-historical exegesis necessarily demanded the Christological interpretation. Then, since Jesus fits this messianic picture, they hold forth these examples of fulfilled prophecy as supposedly primary-level proofs that Jesus is the Messiah and that the Bible is inspired of God. But these apologists fail to realize what the Gospel of John exemplifies for us—that the New Testament itself does not use such an approach. They fail to see that when the miracles of Jesus are put forth as the confirmation of all that he claimed, this included Jesus' unique way of reading the Old Testament. They miss the fact that whenever the New Testament argues cases of fulfilled messianic-prophecy, the inspiration of the Old Testament is what is *assumed to be true* from the outset; the inspiration of Scripture is *not a conclusion* that these alleged cases of fulfilled prophecy themselves can prove.

²⁹ I believe that a prime example of this unawareness is seen in Walter Kaiser's *The Messiah in the Old Testament*. Kaiser tries at length to argue that the Christian reading of various Old Testament texts can be derived from a simple grammatical-historical exegesis. But throughout the book he seems unaware of how his Christian perspective colors his exegesis. This is particularly true in the matter of seeing a single messianic figure running throughout the pages of Old Testament history and prophecy. It is only the Christian perspective that causes this reading to seem so natural. Kaiser assumes that messianic prophecy is a primary-level argument for Christianity, but he has misapprehended the New Testament's apologetic purpose in asserting that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy.

Jesus and his apostles presented to the world a new, unique way of reading the Jewish Scriptures, one that saw a Suffering Messiah as the focal point of all Old Testament promises and as the goal of human history. It is an approach to Scripture that makes good sense out of the vagueness of Old Testament passages, but one that would not be evident to a person if Jesus were not already in one's mind. To use Paul's words, such was "God's mystery, that is, Christ Himself in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:2-3).

Christian apologists today need to use messianic prophecy in a way that comports with the nature of the New Testament's own apologetic use of prophecy. We cannot try to use Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy as a primary-level argument for Christianity when the Gospels do not do so. We cannot simply assert that Jesus fulfilled various Old Testament passages as if our Christological interpretation is always the apparent and necessary meaning of those passages when they are read on their own. We need to realize that the reason why we *know* that our reading of many Old Testament passages is the correct reading is because of our prior acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah and the true Interpreter of Scripture. So we cannot affirm to an unbeliever that the cases of Jesus' fulfillment of Scripture are evidence, in and of themselves, of his messiahship or of the Bible's inspiration. An unbeliever must examine the evidence for the miracles of Jesus and see that these miracles provide abundant confirmation of Jesus' claim to be the fulfillment of Scripture — that is, the fulfillment of Scripture as Jesus elucidated it.

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