

Prophecy, Christology, and Anti-Judaism in Justin Martyr

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Justin Martyr was a second-century apologist, and all of his extant writing is tightly focused on the apologetic task. His christological speculations are limited and entirely at the service of his apologetics. Justin's central concern is the interpretation of Jewish scripture, all of which he regards as prophecy. His overarching apologetic strategy is to establish the unique truth of Christianity by demonstrating that scriptural prophecy is fulfilled by Jesus (and to a lesser extent by the church). At the heart of this strategy is his argument that Jews who fail to embrace Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy thereby willfully forfeit their status as the people of God. For Justin, therefore, christology, the fulfillment of prophecy, and anti-Judaism are organically intertwined. There is no way to disentangle his christology from his anti-Judaism.

This paper is extracted and adapted from my *Helping Jesus Fulfill Prophecy* (Wipf & Stock, 2016). It is thick with examples of Justin's interpretation of prophecy, which are included for those who want to see sufficient data for my interpretation of Justin, but the details in these examples can be skimmed without losing the thread of my argument. In particular, my lengthy analysis of Justin's interpretation of Isaiah's Immanuel prophecy can be skipped altogether. I include it for those with a taste for the kind of close-detail work that goes on in the exegete's workshop (or playhouse—the choice of metaphor is up to you).

The work of Justin is foundational for understanding the traditional Christian perspective on OT prophecy. Demonstrating and drawing out the implications of the fulfillment of the scriptures is at the heart of his theological program. He holds up that fulfillment as a compelling proof for the unique truth of Christianity. He devises a rationale for how the Jewish scriptures could be understood as predicting Jesus, and he provides hundreds of concrete examples. At a time when Christians' relationship to those scriptures was up for grabs and when some were challenging the assumption that Christianity should have anything to do with them, Justin's work amounted to a forceful argument that the Jewish scriptures were not only essential to Christianity, but that Christians were the *only* ones with a rightful claim to those sacred writings. Justin links the argument from prophecy directly to Christian supersessionism, arguing that because Christians had superseded Jews, the Jewish scriptures now belonged to Christians and

not to Jews. Justin thus takes Christian tradition a giant step forward in deploying biblical prophecy as a theological weapon against Jews.

Justin's thinking on prophecy was immensely influential, for it is the earliest comprehensive articulation of what became the standard rationalization of Christianity's appropriation of Hebrew prophecy. Three of Justin's writings, all mid second-century, are extant: the *First Apology*, the *Second Apology*, and the *Dialogue with Trypho*. This paper is concerned with the dialogue.

I begin by situating Justin's argument from prophecy within its context of an intra-Christian controversy. Turning to the *Dialogue with Trypho*, I will look at representative samples of Justin's christological exegesis, examine his argument that the prophets foretold the virgin birth, explain his spurious accusation that Jews had tampered with certain passages from the scriptures, and look into the sources of Justin's curious scriptural "quotations." The paper concludes with a summary of Justin's contribution to Christian anti-Judaism.

The *Dialogue with Trypho* and the Argument with Marcion

The *Dialogue with Trypho* is not really a dialogue. Justin does 99% of the talking. Trypho is cast as a learned Jew, but he functions as Justin's straight man. Once in a while he voices objections to Justin's interpretations, but usually only gets to say something like "I see; please continue." While there might have been a historical Trypho with whom Justin had once debated, "Trypho," the character in the dialogue, is clearly a literary fiction. No self-respecting Jew would listen in tacit approval to Justin's long-winded and gratuitous "arguments" or tolerate his insulting and disgusting abuse of Jews. The dialogue seems to represent Justin's fantasy of what he would say if he had a docile and captive Jewish audience.¹

The dialogue is very long (almost as long as all four gospels combined), repetitious, poorly organized, and padded with numerous extended scriptural "quotations."² Reading this tome will tax the attention of even the nerdiest scholar. One gets the impression that Justin wanted to include everything he could throw at the issue, so as to bury his fictive opponent in an avalanche of alleged evidence. The scope and depth of the argument shows Justin's huge commitment of intellectual labor to the interpretation of the Jewish scriptures. In several places the details of the argument indicate that Justin is wrestling with actual Jewish objections to some Christian

¹ Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?*, 267.

² Many of Justin's quotations neither match the LXX nor are derived from the Hebrew text. Some verses appear to be Christian "targumizations" (see below). And yes, I am aware of the weird irony of putting scare quotes around the word "quotation."

interpretations. Although the Trypho character is Justin's own creation, it seems likely that Justin has argued with real Jews—perhaps among them there was one named Trypho.

The dialogue ends in a failure of sorts: Trypho and his companions are not persuaded. Hypothetically, Justin could have used the ending of his story as the basis for admitting that his own interpretation of scripture is dependent on Christian faith rather than its basis, thereby implicitly acknowledging that the argument from prophecy is not objectively compelling. After all, if an intelligent and fair-minded Jew like Trypho is not persuaded, even after Justin's tidal wave of an argument has washed over him, then it must take more than unaided human reason to see its truth. But Justin does not take this path. Instead he resorts to insult and character assassination, accusing Trypho (and through him, all Jews) of willful blindness, hardness of heart, etc. In doing so Justin took his cue from the New Testament.

Let's reflect for a moment on what might have been. Trypho remains a Jew as the dialogue ends, but the parting is cordial. Trypho's final quoted words to Justin are, "do not hesitate to remember us as friends when you depart." As they leave Trypho wishes Justin "a safe voyage and deliverance from every disaster." The last words in the dialogue—Justin's, naturally—express his hope that Trypho and his friends "may some day come to believe entirely as we do that Jesus is the Christ of God."³

So, after all the argument, the Jews are still Jewish, but they are not enemies. Justin could have used his dialogue to help his readers accept a situation in which Jews and Christians share a body of scriptures that they both venerate but interpret in very different ways. Justin could even insist that Christians understand the scriptures better than Jews do, not because Jews are completely wrong, but because Christians can see deeper (and thus "truer") truths in them than Jews can. Such a scenario would let Christians maintain the superiority of their faith but without denying the legitimacy of the "partial" truth by which Jews live. Such a scenario is not a modern pipe dream anachronistically retrojected to the second century. It is the stance Justin himself takes toward Greek philosophy (see *Second Apology* 13), whose teachings about God had far less in common with Christian beliefs than did Judaism's.

But that was not to be. Justin's argument throughout the dialogue adds up an uncompromising assertion that Jews are utterly in error and that, as a result, the Jewish scriptures belong to Christians and to them alone. That claim takes us to the heart of Justin's project, and to understand it we need to situate it in its own historical and

³ I paraphrase that farewell exchange thus:

Trypho: "I hope you have a safe trip."

Justin: "I hope you don't end up in hell."

theological context. Justin confronts a problem in the mid-second century that did not exist in the late first century when the gospels were written. What had shifted between then and Justin's time was the Christian relationship to the Jewish scriptures. The evangelists took it for granted that those writings belonged to both Jews and Christians and that arguing over their meaning was fair game—that was how all Jews of the time worked out their thinking about religion. By the early second century the Christian movement was largely if not overwhelmingly gentile and its differentiation from Judaism was evident in most regions.⁴ A creative Christian thinker, Marcion, son of the bishop of Pontus, studied the writings of Paul and pondered his contrasts between themes such as law and faith, old and new covenant, Adam and Jesus.⁵ Marcion thought through those contrasts in his own second-century context and drew a conclusion that would have shocked Paul. Marcion's fundamental insight was that Christianity and Judaism were incompatible. His teaching was elegant, logical, and radical: the god of Israel was a different deity than the God who had sent Jesus. The god of Israel was a god of law and wrathful justice; the Father of Jesus was a God of grace and mercy—does that sound familiar?—a God unknown to humanity until Jesus revealed him. Therefore, Marcion argued, the Jewish scriptures were not sacred to Christians, who should repudiate them along with the god they proclaim.

Mainstream Christian thinkers wanted nothing to do with Marcion's theory, for two main reasons. First, it would make Christianity something brand new, which was not a good thing in a world that was suspicious of innovation and that valued antiquity, tradition, and stability. Second, it would mean that the God who created the world was inferior and his creation deeply flawed. There was more to all this, of course, but what is important to our agenda is that Christians who rejected Marcion's answer were now compelled to confront the sticky problem of how to relate to the Jewish scriptures. Those writings were obviously about Israel and Israel's God, and they made it clear that the God of Israel's overarching design for its history was "the establishment of a Jewish theocracy in Jerusalem:"⁶ God would dwell in his temple, and his people would be ruled by his laws and interact with him primarily through the temple cult. The controversy stirred up by Marcion forced a perplexing, and now unavoidable, question: if Christians were not part of Judaism—they did not observe Torah and had nothing to do with the synagogue—then what should they do with the scriptures of Israel?⁷ Non-Marcionite

⁴ See the cautions urged by Knust that in Justin's time one could "not readily identify who was a 'Christian' let alone who was a 'Jew'" (Knust, "Roasting the Lamb," 101, and the literature cited in note 7).

⁵ As in, for example, Galatians 3, 2 Cor 3:6–11, and Rom 5:12–21, respectively.

⁶ Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?*, 268.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 267.

Christians needed to find a way to read those scriptures as a story about the God they knew, a story that led up to Jesus (and thus to themselves). In short, Christians had to co-opt a story that did not belong to them, to transform the Jewish scriptures into Christian ones.⁸

Of course Justin did not put it that way. He gives no clue that he thought that he was transforming the scriptures at all. He presents his task as discovering their true meaning, which had been there all along, but hidden until the coming of Christ allowed it to be seen for what it was.

Justin is clear that the true meanings of the prophecies were hidden. He admits that no one can truly understand prophecy without “a special grace” from God;⁹ Jews therefore are “incapable of understanding the truths spoken by God.”¹⁰ Justin also asserts that God hid the truth of the scriptures from them in punishment for their sins.¹¹ The prophecies were so opaque that even demons didn’t understand them.¹² He explains that the prophets “often expressed themselves in parables and types [prefigurations], thus hiding the truth they held.”¹³ That the prophecies were actually about Jesus was a complete secret.

If through the prophets it was obscurely declared that the Christ would suffer and afterwards become Lord of all, it was impossible for anyone to understand this until Christ himself convinced his apostles that such statements were explicitly proclaimed in the scriptures.¹⁴

Justin’s emphasis on the hidden truth of the scriptures pays off for his program because it guarantees that only Christians can possibly understand them. But this benefit comes at a steep price: Justin’s position entails that the prophecies don’t really predict anything¹⁵ since their meaning can be discovered only in retrospect. Justin seems unaware that this theory of prophecy neutralizes what he elsewhere calls the “work of God.” “It is the work of God to announce something before it happens and then to demonstrate that it happened as it was predicted.”¹⁶ Justin’s understanding of prophecy also effectively undermines the program implicit in the anti-Jewish rhetoric of the

⁸ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁹ *Dialogue* 92 and 119.

¹⁰ *Dialogue* 38; see also 123.

¹¹ *Dialogue* 55 and 38.

¹² *First Apology* 54.

¹³ *Dialogue* 90; see also 52, 112, 130.

¹⁴ *Dialogue* 76.

¹⁵ Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?*, 269.

¹⁶ *First Apology* 12.

gospels, especially Matthew and John. Those two gospels insist that the “Jews” (especially their leaders) should have believed in Jesus after witnessing him fulfill prophecy after prophecy. But that raises the question: if the Jews of Jesus’ day could not know what the prophecies were predicting, how were they supposed to realize that Jesus was fulfilling them?

Justin’s understanding of prophecy confirms a thesis that can be deduced from an analysis of how the fulfillment of prophecy is presented in the gospels: that Jesus’ fulfillment of particular prophecies can be perceived only in hindsight, and that, therefore, the belief that Jesus fulfills prophecy is a result, not the cause, of Christian faith.

Justin’s Theory of the Divine *Logos*

Justin’s distinctive doctrine of the Word (*logos*) of God was his most productive contribution to the intellectual project of claiming the Jewish scriptures for Christianity. Drawing on the rich and respectable philosophical and theological associations of the term *logos*,¹⁷ Justin developed this pregnant notion into a sophisticated foundation for his Christianizing of the scriptures.¹⁸ Equating the Word with the Son of God and the “spirit of prophecy,” the divine force that inspired all the prophetic utterances in the scriptures enabled him to see them not only as *about* Jesus, but as having been *spoken* by him in his pre-existence as the Son of God. Justin goes to great (and wearying) lengths in arguing that it was God the Son, not God the Father, who appeared and spoke to the patriarchs and Moses.

In a number of these arguments Justin quotes the gospels as the authority for his interpretations. In fact, Justin plays the gospel card all through his dialogue with Trypho, who lets this tactic pass without objection. That Trypho keeps silence on this matter is one more indication that this dialogue is fictitious and aimed at a Christian audience. But it is more than that: it also helps us see that Justin’s central concern is to work out how Christians should relate to the Jewish scriptures. Justin, the literary character in the dialogue, is trying to convert Jews, but Justin the author is trying to convince Christians to take the Jewish scriptures seriously, to show them how to do that, and to stake the claim to the scriptures as Christian property.

Justin’s *logos* theory cashes out into the belief that the Jewish scriptures were not only *about* Jesus, but *from* him. That belief had three remarkable and far-reaching effects. (1) It lets Justin (and other Christian exegetes) discover clues to Jesus all over the

¹⁷ For a concise summary see Barnard, *Justin Martyr*, 85–87.

¹⁸ See Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?*, 264–66.

scriptures, in places where they are far from apparent; (2) it transforms the scriptures into words addressed to Christians; and (3) it justifies the Christian claim to own the scriptures—for since Jews do not understand them, they have no moral right to interpret them.

[These prophecies] are contained in your scriptures, or rather not yours, but ours. For we believe and obey them, whereas you, although you read them, do not grasp their spirit.¹⁹

THE ARGUMENT FROM PROPHECY IN THE *DIALOGUE WITH TRYPHO*

Within the scope of this paper, I will focus on a few topics in this sprawling work. I start by sampling Justin's exegesis, briefly surveying eight of his interpretations that display the various ways he discerns Christian realities encoded in Jewish texts. Then I examine in closer detail the one prophecy Justin emphasizes most: the alleged foretelling of Jesus' virgin birth in Isaiah 7:14. Justin tries to overcome Jewish objections to the belief that this prophecy predicts a virgin birth, but I argue that he is wrong on every count. Then I investigate Justin's accusation that Jews have sabotaged scriptural passages that testify to Jesus. The charge is false; in fact, it was Christians who rewrote scriptures and created passages.

Justin's Christological Exegesis

Like all Christian (and Jewish) thinkers, Justin regards all the scriptures as prophecy. Since Moses and David were considered prophets, the writings attributed to them (the Pentateuch and the Psalms) were considered prophetic. Because Justin is convinced that *all* the scriptures testify to Jesus, the slimmest association in the wording, imagery, or symbolism of a passage with something in the Jesus story is enough for Justin to claim that the passage is about Jesus. There are many, many examples in the dialogue. Here are five of them related to Jesus' death and resurrection that tumble out in rapid succession and without supporting arguments in chapter 97.

- Moses' posture during the battle with the Amelekites (Exod 17:8–13) prefigures Jesus' death. "It was no accident that Moses remained until

¹⁹ *Dialogue* 29.

evening in the form of a cross, when his hands were held up by Aaron and Hur, for the Lord also remained on the cross almost until evening.”

- A straightforward prayer in thanksgiving for a peaceful night’s sleep (Ps 3:5–6) becomes a prophecy of the resurrection. “Then he arose from the dead, as David foretold when he said, ‘With my voice I cried to the Lord, and He heard me from his holy hill. I laid down and slept; I awakened, for the Lord sustained me.’”
- “Isaiah foretold the manner of his [Jesus’] death in these words: ‘I have spread out my hand to an unbelieving and contradictory people’” (Isa 65:2). For Justin, “spreading out my hands” is a prophecy of the crucifixion.
- Isaiah also predicted Jesus’ resurrection in these two short and cryptic oracles: “His burial has been taken out of the midst” and “I will give the rich for his death.” The first is from Isa 57:2, the second from Isa 53:9. How either of these curious Septuagint renderings—they both differ entirely in meaning from their Hebrew originals—points to anyone’s resurrection, much less Jesus’, Justin does not say. Trypho neither objects nor inquires.

A few more examples of Justin’s exegesis are sufficient to showcase the different kinds of connections he can make between the OT and his Christian interests.

Isaiah 33:16 is about the rewards of the righteous. “He will live on the heights; his refuge will be the fortresses of rock. His bread will be supplied, his water assured.” Justin sees a deeper, Christian meaning here. To him it is “quite evident” that this verse is a prophecy about the sacrament of the Eucharist.²⁰ All Justin needs is the word “bread.” That Justin imagines that Trypho would understand this, much less agree to it, shows that the audience in Justin’s mind is Christian.

Isaiah 33:19. Justin wrings another specious interpretation from Isaiah a few verses later. He quotes Isa 33:19 thus: “A shameless people, and there is no understanding in him who hears.” Justin turns this against the Jews, as if Isaiah were referring to his own people: “The prophecy also states that . . . they who think they know the very letter of the scriptures, and who listen to the prophecies, have no

²⁰ *Dialogue* 70.

understanding of them."²¹ The wording of the verse Justin quotes here has only a faint resemblance to what we know of Isaiah's actual text, in which the "shameless people" are foreign conquerors, not Israelites, and what the Israelites fail to comprehend is not the prophet's words, but the foreign language of the invaders.²²

Genesis 49:11a. Justin extracts two phrases from Jacob's blessing over his son Judah and reads them as christological prophecies. "Tying his colt to the vine, and the donkey's colt to the tendrils of the vine"

was a prophecy both of the deeds he would perform at his first coming and of the Gentiles' belief in him. For the Gentiles, like a foal, had never been harnessed or felt a yoke upon their necks, until our Christ arrived and sent his disciples to convert them.²³

If Trypho were allowed to speak, he might point out that the "prophecy" does not mention a yoke and that Justin's interpretation does not deal with the vine or the tying, the actual images in the text.

Prophecy and the Virgin Birth

One topic to which Justin repeatedly returns is the prediction of Jesus' virgin birth. He emphasizes that the virgin birth is "an irrefutable proof to all men."²⁴ Justin provides a number of passages in which he sees predictions of the virgin birth (see below), but the one text over which he debates with Trypho is the only one applied by the NT to the pre-natal Jesus:

Look, a *parthenos* will conceive
and will give birth to a son,
and you will name him Immanuel. (Isa 7:14, quoted in Matt 1:23).

(Readers who look forward to ten paragraphs of detailed exegesis with the same enthusiasm as they would a trip to the dentist can skip ahead to the summarized conclusions.)

Justin often brings up the virgin birth and Trypho several times asks him to prove that it was foretold in prophecy. When Justin eventually gets around to that, he

²¹ *Dialogue* 70.

²² Here is Isa 33:19 in the NRSV (based on the Hebrew): "No longer will you see the insolent people, the people of an obscure speech you cannot comprehend, stammering in a language you cannot understand."

²³ *Dialogue* 53.

²⁴ *Dialogue* 84.

starts by quoting all of Isa 7:10–17,²⁵ apparently because he considers that context to be crucial to his christological understanding of 7:14. After that long quotation Justin lets Trypho articulate two objections.²⁶ The first is that Isaiah’s oracle is actually about a young woman, not a virgin. In Trypho’s view Justin’s text of 7:14 is mistaken in its wording and meaning. Trypho’s position is supported by the Hebrew text and the non-Septuagint Greek translations, which have the Hebrew and Greek words that unambiguously mean “young woman” (*‘almah* and *neanis*, respectively). Justin, on the other hand, quotes this verse from the Septuagint, which has *parthenos*, a Greek word that can, but usually does not by itself, mean “virgin.”²⁷ On the basis of the objective textual evidence, Trypho’s “young woman” undoubtedly reflects the original wording of Isaiah’s text.

Trypho’s second objection is that “the prophecy as a whole refers to Hezekiah and it can be shown that the events described in the prophecy were fulfilled in him.”²⁸ Justin does not let Trypho explain this interpretation—which Justin calls a “lie”—but we can infer that Trypho understands 7:14 within both its immediate narrative context in Isa 7:10–13 (which Justin quotes) and its historical context, which is described in Isa 7:1–9 (which Justin does not quote). If those interlocking contexts are taken into account, the birth of a son announced by Isaiah in 7:14 is intended to be a sign to King Ahaz (Isa 7:10–13) of God’s providence in the face of an imminent attack on Jerusalem (Isa 7:1–9). That is why Trypho, representing Jewish interpreters in general, sees Isaiah’s sign fulfilled in the birth of Hezekiah, Ahaz’s son and heir to his throne. Trypho’s interpretation coincides with the consensus of modern critical scholars.

Justin responds to Trypho’s with two counter-arguments to the first objection and one to the second. None of Justin’s arguments holds up to scrutiny. His first reply is not really an argument, but an adamant assertion, laced with insult, of the accuracy of the Septuagint’s translation.

Here too you dare to distort the translation of this passage made by your elders at the court of Ptolemy, the king of Egypt,²⁹ asserting that the real

²⁵ *Dialogue* 66.

²⁶ *Dialogue* 67.

²⁷ Miller, *Born Divine*, 189–90.

²⁸ *Dialogue* 67.

²⁹ It was Jewish lore that the Septuagint was produced under the patronage of the Hellenistic rulers of Egypt. The story can be found in the second-century BCE *Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates*. See Law, *When God Spoke Greek*, 35–39.

meaning of the scripture is not as they translated it, but should read,
 “Behold, a young woman will conceive.”³⁰

Justin has encountered this kind of Jewish objection before and he has no patience for it. “Whenever there arises in the scriptures an evident contradiction of their [i.e., Trypho’s teachers’] silly and conceited doctrine, they boldly affirm that it was not so written in the original text.”³¹

Justin’s second argument for why Isa 7:14 predicts the virgin birth is that Isaiah points to the birth as a sign from God, which it would not be if the boy were conceived naturally because there is nothing unusual in that.³² What Justin overlooks (intentionally?) is that Isaiah specifically intends the sign to be a sign *for Ahaz* (see Isa 7:10–13).³³ The birth of Jesus (virginal or otherwise) eight centuries later could not be a sign for Ahaz.³⁴ We can surmise that Trypho, like modern critical scholars, understands that the sign is expressed in the timing of the boy’s birth, not in the manner of his conception, a point made clear in 7:16 (before the boy is old enough to know right from wrong, the two kings on their way to dethrone Ahaz will be as nothing). The birth must therefore be imminent if it is to be a sign to Ahaz in his present crisis.

Justin’s attempt to refute Trypho’s point that the prophecy in Isaiah 7 was fulfilled in Hezekiah moves the argument to a different, though deceptively similar, oracle from Isaiah 8. When Trypho challenges Justin, “Please show us how that passage [Isa 7:14] refers to your Christ, and not to Hezekiah, as we Jews believe,”³⁵ Justin’s response focuses not on 7:14 but on 8:4, which he argues cannot apply to Hezekiah, but only to Jesus:

Before the child knows how to call father or mother, he will take the power of Damascus and the spoils of Samaria in the presence of the king of Assyria. (Isa 8:4 LXX)

³⁰ *Dialogue* 84.

³¹ *Dialogue* 68.

³² *Dialogue* 84.

³³ In “Yahweh himself will give you a sign” (7:14), the “you” is plural in both Hebrew and Greek. But this need mean no more than that 7:14 is addressed to the king and his royal entourage. Isaiah also uses the plural “you” in 7:13, when he addresses Ahaz as “house of David.”

³⁴ By definition, a virgin birth could not be a sign for *anyone* (except the mother), because it would not be apparent that the child had no human father. See Miller, *Born Divine*, 166–67 and 263–67.

³⁵ *Dialogue* 77.

Justin here quotes the Septuagint, which could say something very different than the Hebrew text, depending on how it is taken. The Septuagint verse contains a grammatical ambiguity that Justin construes in a peculiar way. The ambiguity is contained in the third person singular verb “will take”: who is its subject?³⁶ The common sense reading of the verse is that an indefinite “one” will take the power of Damascus and the spoils of Samaria, not, as Justin reads it, that the child will do so, though “the child” is the closest antecedent to the verb and thus grammatically the more likely candidate for the subject of the sentence. If we accept the “one will take” option, then the Septuagint has a meaning quite close to the Hebrew text, which says, “Before the child knows how to call ‘my father’ and ‘my mother,’ the wealth of Damascus and the spoils of Samaria will be carried away by the king of Assyria.” Isaiah’s words in Hebrew predict that Assyria will defeat Damascus and Samaria before the promised boy is old enough to say his first words, whereas in Justin’s interpretation of the Septuagint the child himself will overpower those two countries under the nose of the Assyrian king. In Hebrew, Isaiah’s announcement is the kind of short-term prediction about military affairs that are the stock-in-trade of the prophets. According to Justin, on the other hand, Isaiah foretells a bizarre miracle in which a baby defeats two nations in the jurisdiction of a foreign king.

In arguing that Isa 8:4 (in Justin’s version) was not fulfilled by Hezekiah, Justin insists that the prophecy could apply to him only if it did not contain its first clause about the baby’s age. But since the prophecy says “Before the child knows how to call father or mother, he shall take the power of Damascus and the spoils of Samaria,” Justin asserts that “you cannot prove that this ever happened to any of you Jews, but we Christians can show that it did happen to our Christ.”³⁷ How Justin makes the case for that last claim is fascinating and, to modern readers, utterly unconvincing. He maintains that this prophecy was fulfilled when the magi visited the baby Jesus. That argument requires some freewheeling exegesis, since the gospel story mentions neither Damascus nor Samaria nor the king of Assyria. It does, however, feature King Herod, whom, Justin says, “scripture calls king of Assyria because of his wicked ungodliness.” The Bible nowhere does any such thing, which is probably why Justin provides no clue as to his source for this startling and gratuitous assertion. The best he can do is to remind us that “the Holy Spirit often speaks in parables and similitudes,”³⁸ which might be Justin’s cryptic admission that the scriptures do not *actually* call Herod the king of Assyria.

What about the baby conquering Damascus and despoiling Samaria? When did the baby Jesus do that? Justin’s explanation needs to be read in his own words.

³⁶ Greek, like many inflected languages, does not require a separate pronoun to indicate the subject of a verb. Here the verb *lēpsetai* can mean “he/she/one/it will take.”

³⁷ *Dialogue 77*.

³⁸ *Dialogue 77*.

“He will take the power of Damascus and the spoils of Samaria” meant that the power of the wicked demon that dwelt in Damascus should be crushed by Christ at his birth. This is shown to have taken place. For the Magi, held in servitude (as spoils) for the commission of every wicked deed through the power of that demon, by coming and worshipping Christ, openly revolted against the power that had held them as spoils, which power the scripture indicated by parable to be located in Damascus. And in the parables that sinful and wicked power is fittingly called Samaria.³⁹

It is stating the obvious to say that this interpretation will not convince Jews, nor even Christians, except those willing to indulge the most fanciful correlations. Nothing in the Gospel of Matthew hints that the magi are in servitude to a demon. If anything, Matthew portrays them as righteous gentiles. Furthermore, Justin’s scenario bends logic: if the magi were enslaved to a demon, why would that demon permit them to seek and worship Jesus? Justin seems to realize how thin his hermeneutical ice is at this point, judging from his lame assertion that “Damascus” and “Samaria” are symbolic names for evil powers. Justin allows Trypho to register his skepticism by letting him say, “The words of God are indeed holy, but your interpretations are artificial.”⁴⁰ (Justin could not have known that, nineteen centuries later, fair-minded readers would agree with his straw man Trypho.)

There is another irony in this exchange, one that raises troubling questions about Justin’s intellectual integrity. Recall how Justin stressed the importance of literary context. Indeed, he admitted that if the prophecy in Isa 8:4 were considered out of context, Trypho’s interpretation of it would be plausible. It is only when the oracle is taken as a whole, and not quoted selectively, that Justin can find a reason for applying it to Jesus—we leave aside here the problem of Justin’s reliance on a dubious reading from the Septuagint. The irony is that if the oracle in 8:4 is taken in its appropriate literary context, Justin’s interpretation of it becomes untenable, for the child spoken of in 8:4 is identified in 8:3 as the son of Isaiah himself, a boy already born and burdened with the weird and unwieldy name “Maher-shalal-hash-baz.” By severing 8:4 from 8:3 Justin is indulging in the selective quoting at which Matthew and company were adept, so it should not surprise us. But Justin’s double standard is glaring; a few pages earlier he had lectured Trypho on the need to pay proper attention to context.

³⁹ *Dialogue* 78, quoting Isa 8:4 LXX.

⁴⁰ *Dialogue* 79.

Is this what it seems to be: blatant hypocrisy? The only mitigating factor one might plausibly plead on Justin's behalf is that he genuinely believed that, as a Christian, he was entitled to his double standard. If so, his hypocrisy is sincere. He seemed to think that quoting out of context is wrong when Jews do it, but not when Christians do. Justin apparently saw nothing *intrinsically* improper about ignoring context. When context helps Christians to see the "right" interpretation, context should be considered; when it doesn't, it should be ignored. It seems that the ends justify the means.

Conclusions about Isaiah 7:14

Justin's robust attempt to prove that Isaiah predicted the virgin birth must be judged a failure. Justin's arguments are structured as refutations of Trypho's two objections to the Christian interpretation of Isaiah 7: first, that Isa 7:14 is about a young woman, not specifically a virgin, and second, that Isaiah's prophecy about the birth of a promised child refers to Hezekiah, son and heir of King Ahaz, to whom the oracle was delivered.

Justin counters the first objection in two ways: by stridently asserting that Trypho is wrong about the wording of 7:14, and by arguing that the birth announced in the prophecy must be a miraculous birth in order to be a sign. Justin's first assertion is nothing more than his insistence that his text of Isaiah (the Septuagint) is right and Trypho's text (either the Hebrew text or a literal Greek translation of it) is wrong. Despite Justin's adamant insistence on the accuracy of the Septuagint,⁴¹ anyone who could read Hebrew would disagree and would be right to do so. Justin's argument that the birth in 7:14 had to be miraculous in order to qualify as a sign ignores the verse's immediate context (Isa 7:10–13), which shows that the predicted birth will be a sign from God because of *when* the boy will be born, not because of the manner of his conception. That Justin ignores that context *deliberately* is clear from the fact that he quotes 7:10–13 in full, but does not allow it to influence his interpretation of 7:14. Justin tries to refute Trypho's second objection—that the promised sign was fulfilled by the birth of prince Hezekiah—with a complicated interpretation of Isa 8:4, joined with a convoluted and capricious interpretation of the story of the magi in Matthew. Justin's argument here is

⁴¹ Justin's insistence on the accuracy of the Septuagint (at least in regard to Isa 7:14) is undoubtedly rooted in the fact that the Gospel of Matthew quotes Isa 7:14 from the Septuagint. However, Matt 2:15 quotes Hosea 11:1 in its Hebrew version, rather than from the Septuagint because the latter version would make it impossible for Matthew to apply the prophecy to Jesus. It is ironic that Justin's principle of the superiority of the Septuagint would make Matthew's choice in 2:15 invalid.

undermined on several counts, but is decisively ruled out by the plain meaning of Isa 8:3.

Justin's Textual Sources

Scholars who have toiled at the task of comparing Justin's biblical quotations with the various second-century versions of the Septuagint have discovered that Justin sometimes quotes from the Septuagint and sometimes from some other non-Septuagint version. In a good number of cases he quotes and comments on two different versions of the same passage, one Septuagint and one not. But there is a problem: Justin thinks that his non-Septuagint quotations represent the true Septuagint, while his quotations that actually match the Septuagint, quotations he calls "Jewish," he regards as non-Septuagintal.⁴² Justin refers to those biblical manuscripts as Jewish because in his day pretty much the only available copies of the OT (LXX) were produced by Jewish scribes.⁴³ Justin's other (non-Septuagint) sources for quotations were not actual copies of the Bible, but rather anthologies of proof texts made by Christians for the express purpose of demonstrating that Jesus had fulfilled the scriptures. Those anthologies are known to scholars by the Latin term *testimonia* ("testimony sources"). No copy of them has survived,⁴⁴ but from what scholars can deduce from studying the many variants in how early Christian authors quote the OT, those testimonies were very free quotations, often paraphrased to make the connection to Jesus as clear as possible. The paraphrasing techniques can be described as "targumizing," that is, mixing quotation with creative embellishment. The testimony sources probably also featured quotations that blended material from more than one passage, "composite quotations created with great care."⁴⁵ Furthermore, the testimony sources were not simply collections of biblical material, the "quoted" passages were probably accompanied by interpretations and arguments showing how they applied to Jesus.⁴⁶

The Influence of Justin's Sources on his Anti-Judaism

What we know about the nature of those early Christian testimony sources can shed light on Justin's experience of and attitude toward the OT. It seems likely that Justin's

⁴² "What Justin calls 'LXX' text is the text of his testimony source(s), while the 'Jewish' text is the text of his Biblical MSS" (Skarsaune, *Proof from Prophecy*, 43).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁴ The Coptic Psalms testimony recently discovered by Hedrick seems to be an exception.

⁴⁵ Skarsaune, *Proof from Prophecy*, 91.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

conversion to Christianity was facilitated not by the OT as we know it, but as he received it from Christians. It came to him “in conveniently doctored form,”⁴⁷ complete with interpretive aids that “proved” how the prophetic passages were fulfilled in Jesus. In Justin’s subjective experience, then, the christological meaning of the OT seemed natural and self-evident. He might well have been genuinely puzzled why Jews who revered these scriptures could not (or would not) see their “real” meaning, which was so obvious to him. Judging from what we see in the *Dialogue* Justin’s wonderment found two very different resolutions. First, he discovered the explanation for Jewish “disbelief” in the OT itself, in the abundant and fulsome passages that indict Israelites for their hard hearts, wanton sinfulness, and stubborn rebellion against God’s will. We have seen this before, a Christian construction of a Catch-22 in which prophecy is fulfilled precisely by Jewish rejection of the claim that Jesus fulfilled prophecy (e.g., Acts 28:25–27). Second, Justin’s wonderment at Jewish disbelief was probably a primary motivation for his writing his huge *Dialogue*. He would gather all the christological interpretations he could find or devise, arrange them into a dialogue with an imaginary Jew, and so demonstrate to his Christian audience how right they were and why the Jews were so wrong.

If, as seems nearly certain, Justin received his Christian indoctrination with the help of testimony sources rather than the OT as we know it, we can understand his reaction to actual biblical manuscripts. We would expect Justin to regard his Christian textual sources with the strong affection and gratitude typical of mature converts, for he would revere those texts as a means by which he had found the truth and attained salvation. We should not be surprised that when Justin discovered that Jewish copies of the Bible differed in their contents and wording from his Christian sources that he would easily believe that it was Jews, not Christians, who had tampered with the texts.⁴⁸ As noted, that Christian tampering included not only freestyle paraphrasing, targum-like elaborations, and composite quotations, but also the interpolation of non-biblical passages and interpretive comments. From our perspective we can see that these Christian texts, in effect, rigged the game from the start. But it would be a mistake for us to see those textual manipulations as deliberate forgeries intended to deceive. The targumizing techniques evident in the testimony sources indicate that they were the work of Jewish-Christians, which we would expect a priori anyway, since only (former) Jews would have a deep knowledge of Israel’s scriptures. Jewish targumists understood themselves, not as creating new meanings for the scriptures, but as faithfully transmitting their true message. Since the Jewish believers in Jesus who crafted the testimony sources inherited that understanding of how biblical interpretation is

⁴⁷ Wilson, *Related Strangers*, 271.

⁴⁸ For examples, see *Helping Jesus*, 254-55.

practiced, we should see their way of treating the scriptures “as an expression of genuine concern for the deeper meaning of the sacred text.”⁴⁹ We take it for granted that the meaning of a text must be determined from its wording. But in the Jewish world of interpretation, which was home to both the targumists and the authors of the testimony sources, the meaning of a biblical passage was primary, its wording secondary. Rewording the Bible to help its “true” meaning shine forth was an accepted aspect of the practice of faithful interpretation. Jews, including Jewish-Christians, seemed to understand that.

But Justin did not, and neither did the other Christian authors who relied on testimony sources. Those Gentile Christians did not come to the task of interpretation with Jewish presuppositions. Instead, they mistakenly assumed that the doctored texts in the testimony sources were the actual words of scripture. This fed their hostility toward Jews and led to the false accusations that they had mutilated the scriptures.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of the argument from prophecy in the *Dialogue with Trypho* has yielded several salient conclusions about Justin’s interpretation of scripture.

- His exegeses of prophecies are possible only from the presuppositions of Christian faith. Justin’s examples are ample evidence that Christians found Jesus in the OT only because they already knew he had to be there and then went looking for him.
- What Justin thinks are quotations of scripture are often Christian mashups that rewrite and embellish scripture to make it say what Christians want it to.
- Justin ridicules Jews for deleting passages from scripture that are in fact Christian interpolations.
- Justin’s argument for the virgin birth is a textbook example of bad exegesis. It hinges on his insistence on an ambiguous translation of the original text, a willful ignoring of literary context, a nonsensical construal of grammar, and an interpretation of the magi story that is, frankly, bizarre.

On every important point about prophecy where Justin disagrees with Trypho, Justin is wrong, despite the fact that Trypho is Justin’s literary creation. The only reason Justin lets Trypho disagree at all in this shamelessly one-sided “dialogue” is so that its Christian audience can see how baseless Jewish objections really are. Persuasive as Justin’s arguments surely were for ancient Christians, today they fall completely flat.

⁴⁹ Skarsaune, *Proof from Prophecy*, 91.

Coda: The Logic of Justin's Anti-Judaism

Whatever we might think of the cogency of Justin's interpretation of scripture, we should not doubt that he stood secure in his belief that he was on the side of truth and that the Jews are utterly wrong about the scriptures. His attacks on the Jews are ugly, to be sure, but we need to understand those attacks because they are integral to his theological project. Because it is "self-evident" that the scriptures are about Jesus, the errors of the Jews must be willful and therefore culpable. This polemic is strewn throughout the *Dialogue*; a few examples are more than sufficient to take their measure.

You Jews are a ruthless, stupid, blind, and lame people.⁵⁰

You are neither wise nor understanding, but sly and treacherous; wise only for evil actions, but utterly unfit to know the hidden will of God, or the trustworthy covenant of the Lord, or to find the everlasting paths.⁵¹

It is only your obstinacy that prevents you from knowing the mind and will of God.⁵²

[referring to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey]: It had been explicitly foretold that the Christ would do precisely this; when he had done it in the sight of all he furnished clear proof that he was the Christ. And yet, even after those things have happened and are proved from the scriptures, you persist in refusing to believe.⁵³

For Justin the Jewish interpretation of scripture is a massive sin for which Jews deserve both the historical punishments God has meted out to them (the scourge of two wars with Rome, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, and the devastation of their homeland) and the forfeiture of their status as the "chosen people" to the Christians. Toward the end of the dialogue after Justin has rattled off a long list of prophecies that supposedly foretell that God will choose a new people to replace Israel, Justin hammers his point home by having Trypho incredulously ask, "Do you mean to say that you are Israel, and that God says all this about you"? Justin eventually responds,

⁵⁰ *Dialogue* 27.

⁵¹ *Dialogue* 123.

⁵² *Dialogue* 68.

⁵³ *Dialogue* 53.

As your whole people was called after Jacob, surnamed Israel, so we who obey the precepts of Christ, are, through Christ who begot us to God, both called and in reality are Jacob and Israel and Judah and Joseph and David and true children of God.⁵⁴

Concerning the destruction wreaked by the Romans, Justin goes so far as to imply that God had planned those punishments from the time of Abraham. According to Justin, God's purpose in requiring the circumcision of Abraham and his descendants was so that the Romans could distinguish Jews from all others and thus single them out for retribution.

The purpose of this [circumcision] was that you and *only you* might suffer the afflictions that are now justly yours; that only your land be desolate, and your cities ruined by fire; that the fruits of your land be eaten by strangers before your eyes; that not one of you be permitted to enter your city of Jerusalem. Your circumcision of the flesh is the only mark by which you can be distinguished from other men. . . The above-mentioned tribulations were justly imposed on you, for you have murdered the Just One, and his prophets before him; now you spurn those who hope in him [i.e., Christians].⁵⁵

Not only is Justin's theory about the purpose of circumcision hateful,⁵⁶ but it also pretends—incredibly—that Judea was the only nation to be crushed by Rome's military might. Moreover, Justin is wrong that Jews were the only people to practice circumcision, and he is well aware that many Christians did so as well.⁵⁷

Anti-Judaism is not some unfortunate by-product of Justin's christological interpretation of scripture. It is the wellspring of his entire theological project. His aim was to claim the Jewish scriptures for Christianity, and not merely to establish that Christians could and must use them, but to show that those writings were genuinely Christian. To do that it was not enough for him to argue that the Jewish understanding of scripture was inadequate, nor even that Jews misunderstand the meaning of the scriptures. The logic of Justin's theological premises drove him to assert that Jews know

⁵⁴ *Dialogue* 123.

⁵⁵ *Dialogue* 16.

⁵⁶ In our post-Holocaust context it is horrifying beyond words to imagine a ruthless military superpower using circumcision as a criterion by which to single out Jews for atrocities. If the claim that such a horror is the express purpose of God is not blasphemous, then what is?

⁵⁷ See *Dialogue* 47.

from the scriptures the truth about Christ and spurn it. How else to explain why God had rejected the people he once chose as his own? From within Justin's theological context, which was strongly influenced by the Marcionite controversy, the only way to justify the God of Abraham and the prophets was to de-legitimize the Jews.⁵⁸

Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* is a landmark achievement in that it forges—and articulates with eloquence and energy—an essential link between the argument from prophecy and supersessionism. That linkage, the belief that the Jews have been abandoned by God because of their refusal to embrace the messiah foretold by the prophets, remained central to the long, shameful, and sinful history of Christian anti-Judaism.

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⁵⁸ See Efroymsen, "Patristic Connection."