

Text-Critical Perspectives on Messianic Prophecy

by
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The first task in exegesis is to establish the text of any given passage. This is just as true when studying the Old Testament as it is for the New Testament. Textual criticism is especially significant for studying messianic prophecy because a significant number of textual variants are found in passages commonly understood to be messianic in the New Testament. The following is a discussion of the role of the Masoretic Text and textual criticism as it applies to messianic prophecy.

The Masoretic Text and Other Versions

“Evangelicals, in the desire to stress the verbal inspiration of the Old Testament text, should be careful not to identify the ‘original’ Hebrew text with the Masoretic Text” (Sailhamer 1995, 224). The Masoretic Text should not achieve a status comparable to a *textus receptus*. Although the Masoretic Text is quite good and Old Testament exegesis would be near to impossible today without it, it would be unwise to consider it equal to the autographa. In fact, as Sailhamer says, “The history of the Masoretic Text is of vital importance . . . because it is the starting point of textual criticism, not because it is the final destination” (Sailhamer 1995, 224). How is this so?

The Masoretic Text reflects a consonantal text that was not clearly consolidated until the second century A.D. and pointings and accents that were not formulated until the ninth and tenth centuries A.D. (Wurthwein 1979, 26). As such, as Wurthwein says, “the pointing does not possess the same authority as the consonantal text” (Wurthwein 1979, 27). Therefore, it is best *not* to view the Masoretic Text as a kind of received text, regardless of its strength and

importance. Rather, it should be seen as the top layer of a distinct postbiblical exegetical tradition. Although the Masoretic Text represents the original intent of the biblical autographs in a remarkable way, it also has much theology embedded in its standardization of the consonantal text and its addition of accents and vowels (Sailhamer 1995, 204-05, 218-21).

In light of this, the theological importance of other ancient versions becomes readily apparent. For example, the Greek Septuagint is a version of the Old Testament that is nearly one thousand years older than the Masoretic Text. That is not to say that the Masoretic Text is always or often inferior, but rather that the Septuagint and other ancient versions provide “a viable alternative witness to the meaning of the text of Scripture, and thus the potential for an alternative biblical theology” (Sailhamer 1995, 205). Furthermore, the New Testament authors’ frequent use of the Septuagint, when quoting the Old Testament lends further importance to this version.

The Masoretic Text and Messianic Prophecy

The above discussion relates to messianic prophecy in that the Masoretic Text is a post-Christian, Jewish version of the Old Testament. As such, it reflects the theological perspective of post-Christian Judaism. Thus, there are several significant examples of the Masoretic Text interpreting Old Testament texts in a non-messianic (or historical) way, whereas other ancient versions interpret them of the Messiah. This is not to say that the Masoretic Text is the product of some conspiracy to excise Messiah from the Old Testament, as some medieval polemicists claimed.¹ If that were so, the Masoretic Text would not have retained as much about the

¹This was maintained by medieval disputants with Judaism, such as Pablo Christiani and Raymond Martini. For a more thorough historical discussion of their claims, see Jeremy

Messiah as it did. However, it is to say that in some places the Masoretic Text reflects a less messianic view than other versions. What follows will highlight a number of these examples.²

Judges 18:30

The theological perspective of the Masoretic Text is evident in the suspended nun in Judges 18:30. The consonantal text's original reading was that מֹשֶׁה (Mosheh or Moses) was the grandfather of Jonathon, who founded a pagan priesthood. The Masoretic Text inserted a suspended נ, making the word read מְנַשֶּׁה (Menasheh or Menassah). This was done to protect the honor of Moses. It was unthinkable for the exalted lawgiver and prophet of Judaism to have been the grandfather of the founder of a pagan priesthood (Sailhamer 1995, 220). Although, this example does not pertain directly to messianic prophecy, it is significant because it demonstrates that the Masoretic Text can reflect a later theological perspective.

Number 24:7

In Number 24:7, according to the Masoretic Text, the king that would arise from Jacob was to be higher than אָגָג (Agag), linking this prophecy to David's day (1 Sam 15:8). However, according to the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, the King from Jacob was to be exalted above גֹּג (Gog), linking this prophecy with Messiah's day (Ezek 38:3) (Sailhamer 1995, 220-21).

Cohen's The Friars and the Jews (1983, 148-52).

²Sailhamer discusses a number of these passages (Sailhamer 1995, 204-05, 220-21) and I am indebted to him for pointing me in this direction. I will include some of the passages he cites as well as several others.

It is interesting to note that in his commentary, Ashley recognizes the antiquity of the Septuagint messianic reading. Although he considers the Masoretic Text “difficult and obscure (and possibly corrupt),” he still prefers to accept the Masoretic Text rather than deal with alternate textual evidence. He explains the messianic rendering of the Septuagint as a mere reflection of the intense messianic speculations of the second century B.C. and not as an authentic reading which would yield a messianic prophecy (Ashley 1993, 491). This approach seems ill advised. In light of broad witness to the גלג reading and the weaknesses of the Masoretic Text in this instance, the better alternative would be to take the Septuagint as the original reading, as did Albright (1968, 16).

2 Samuel 23:1

In 2 Sam 23:1, the Masoretic Text contains a seeming self-description by David, when it reads “the man who was raised on high declares, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the delight of the songs of Israel.” This translation hinges on the Masoretic Text reading לע , which means “on high.” However, the Septuagint reads $\epsilon\pi\iota$ (“concerning”), apparently reading the Hebrew word not with the vowel *qamas* but with a *pathah* (לע). This slight difference in pointing results in a significant difference in translation: “The man who was raised up declares concerning the Messiah (Anointed) of the God of Jacob, the delight of the songs of Israel.”

Sailhamer aptly explains the significance of the different readings when he writes, “The effect of the difference in the length of the vowel is such that the title ‘anointed one’ in the Masoretic Text refers to King David, whereas in other, non-Masoretic versions of the text, David’s words are taken as a reference to the Messiah (cf. 2 Sa 22:51)” (Sailhamer 1995, 221).

If the alternate, non-Masoretic reading is correct (and it must be remembered that the vocalization of the consonantal text occurred in the ninth through tenth century A.D.), then 2 Sam 23:1 gives a crucial interpretive clue to reading Davidic psalms. By the author's own admission, he frequently wrote about the Messiah, the delightful one of the songs of Israel.

Psalm 72:5

In Psalm 72:5, there is a significant difference between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint.³ The Masoretic Text reads, יִירָאוּךָ , “they will fear you,” while the Septuagint reads σὺμπορομενεῖ , which is a translation of the Hebrew יִנָּחֵם , “he will endure.” The resulting meanings are quite different. The Masoretic Text's meaning is that the righteous king (described in the Psalm) would have such a significant impact on the nation that the people would fear God and submit to him forever. The Septuagint's meaning reflects the messianic interpretation inherent in the psalm, asking for the Messianic King's life and reign to endure forever.

There are several reasons to prefer the Septuagint reading over the Masoretic Text in Psalm 72:5. First, there is no proper explanation for the Masoretic Text's insertion of a second person pronoun of direct address to the Lord. In the preceding and following verses, the writer uses the third person singular pronoun, obviously describing the king. However, the Masoretic Text suddenly inserts a second person pronoun between these verses. This cannot properly describe the king (who is described in the third person singular). Referring the second person

³Note that 72:17 has a similar difficulty between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text reads “may his name sprout forth before the sun shines,” while the Septuagint reads, “his name shall remain continually before the sun.” (Murphy 1948, 42-43)

pronoun to God causes a violent transition, particularly because the next verse returns to the third person singular pronoun reference to the king.

Secondly, the subject of יִירָאוּךָ ("they will fear you") has no clear antecedent. To whom does the word "they" refer? There is nothing in the context that can fit this pronoun.

Thirdly, the word יִסְתַּבֵּן ("endure") fits better with the temporal allusions in verses 5-7. There it speaks of the sun enduring, the moon enduring through all generations, and that there will be abundant peace "till the moon is no more." The context refers to time not the fear of God (See Murphy 1948, 21).

It might be argued that the Masoretic Text is the harder reading and therefore original. However, it would be necessary to demonstrate that there is a literary basis for the Masoretic Text reading somewhere in the context. However, there is no such evidence.

Heim has argued against the messianic rendering because the psalm is pre-exilic and "at this early stage in Israel's history a developed messianism or expectation of 'eternal life' is highly unlikely" (Heim 1995, 241). However, this is nothing more than circular logic as he himself admits - "This argument could of course be accused of circular reasoning" (Heim 1995, 241). It is the same kind of logic that caused Duhm, who accepted the Septuagintal reading, to date the psalm as post-exilic. He believed the messianic meaning could not have been present in the pre-exilic period (Cited by Heim 1995, 239). Both of these writers seem to deny the possibility of supernatural revelation which would allow the author to write of the Messiah prior to the exile.

In light of all of the above, it seems best to accept the Septuagint reading for this verse, with all its messianic implications.

Isaiah 9:5(6)

In this central messianic text, the Masoretic Text's accentuation can produce a significantly different interpretation than the Hebrew words alone might express. The verse is commonly read as, "And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace." In this rendering, the title "Almighty God" is applied to the child who is to be born as Davidic king, clearly implying the deity of the King (cf. Isaiah 10:21).

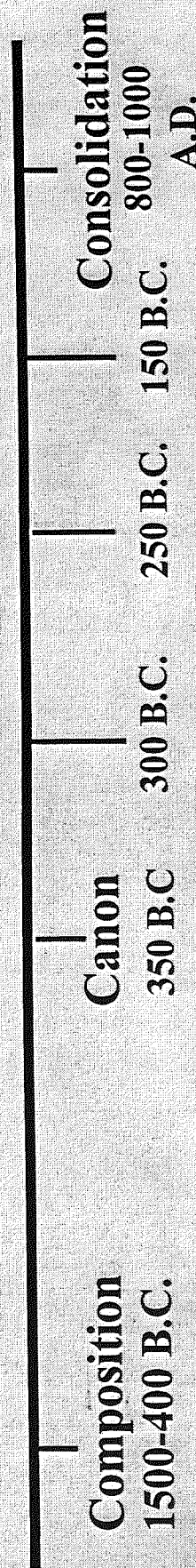
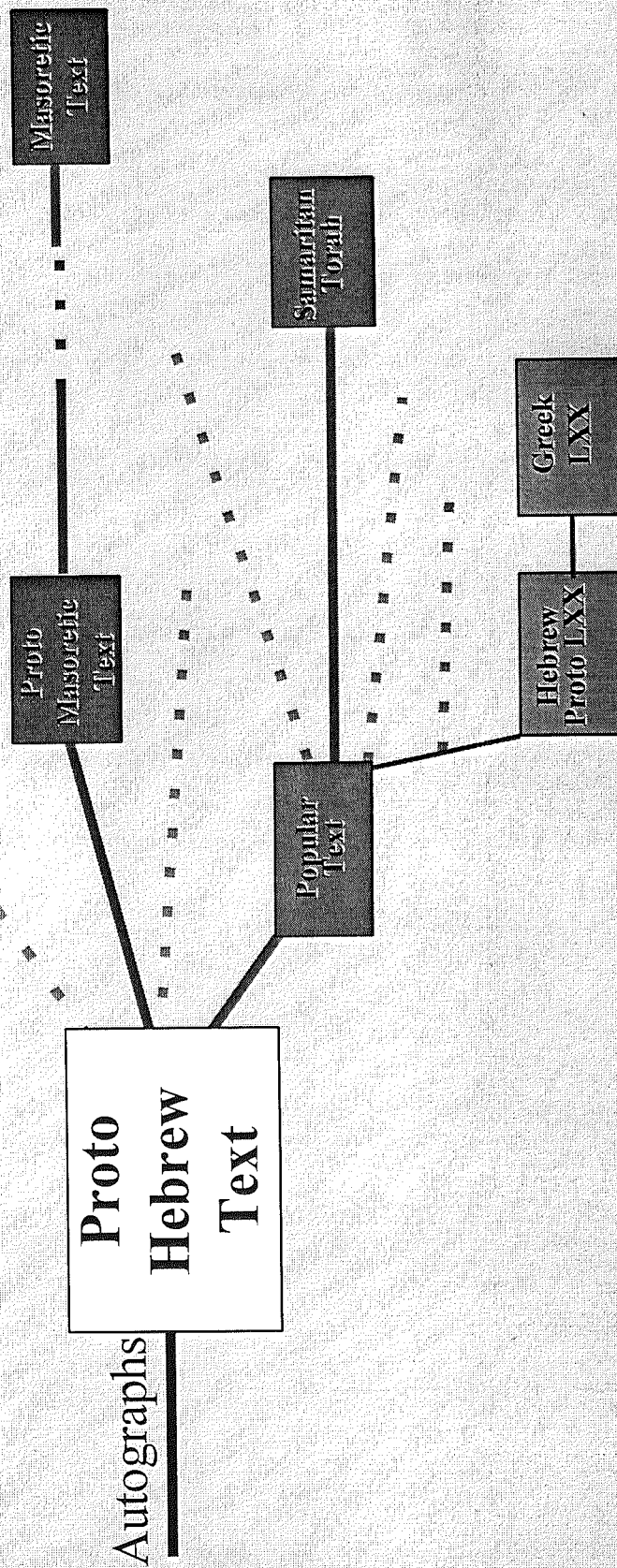
However, the Masoretic Text inserts intermediate points which divide the titles (Delitzsch 1980, 1:249) resulting in this translation: 'The Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God calls his name eternal father, prince of peace.' This reading negates the child's deity and is decidedly different from the New Testament rendering in Luke 1:32-33 (Sailhamer 1995, 221). It seems to be an example of the Masoretic Text exhibiting its perspective that a child could not be called "Mighty God."

Psalms 22:17 (16)

One of the most controversial passages is Psalm 22:17. Although there are a number of variants, the basic difference is that the Masoretic Text reads כְּאֶרֶב, ("as a lion") and the Septuagint reads ωρυξαν, a translation of the Hebrew כָּאֵרָו ("they pierced"). The Masoretic Text rendering avoids the Christological implications, making it more acceptable to Judaism. However, the Septuagint reading has the older support. It seems that the Masoretic Text is the harder reading since it lacks a verb and requires a form of ellipsis. However, there is a difference between a harder reading and an impossible one. The Septuagint reading fits the context and makes sense. Once again, the Masoretic Text chooses the non-messianic rendering (Delitzsch 1980, V:I.317-20).

The purpose of this paper was to demonstrate that the Masoretic Text, as valuable as it is, should be viewed as the top most strata of the interpretive layers of the TaNaK. The careful interpreter should be aware of text-critical issues when interpreting messianic prophecy, because these prophecies may be buried in the Old Testament critical apparatus rather than in the Masoretic Text itself.

THE HISTORY OF THE HEBREW TEXT



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Rabbinic Influence on Christian Interpretation

