



# Controversial Texts: Jewish Answers to Missionary Challenges

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## **To The Jewish Reader**

America, contrary to repeated statements from the Christian Right, is not a “Christian country.” Despite such claims, America does not have a Christian government, nor one founded on “Christian principles.” Jews in America are equal citizens with all other Americans, and that is not the case because Christian Americans have decided to tolerate us or because they unilaterally grant us the privilege of citizenship. We enjoy the rights we have precisely because our government refuses to take sides in religious questions, or to favor any religion over another just because they make up the majority of citizens.

It is, however, more accurate to say that America is a largely Christian *culture*. Every culture has its unique ideas and values it wishes to promote. And in a society like ours where the free exchange of ideas is encouraged, some segments of the Christian community are anxious to testify to and persuade other Americans about the rightness and truth of Christianity as they see it. Thus Jews are often faced with, at times bombarded with, assertions of Christian belief coming from our friends, neighbors and acquaintances. In point of fact, most Christians are not interesting in converting Jews, and certainly not in harassing us. Still, we find some forms of Christian “witness” (especially those actively seeking to convert Jews from Judaism to Christianity) to be intrusive. Even if we find it objectionable, this is still fair and protected behavior in a free society. But it is equally fair and right for us to question, critique, or reject those claims that conflict with our own beliefs, based on the rightness and truth of Judaism as we see it.

The Psalms tells us, *lo ira*, don’t be afraid. This pamphlet is meant to help you understand Christian polemical claims in light of Jewish teachings. It is meant to help you not be afraid to enter into conversation with those Christians intent on “missionizing” you. It is not intended that you use the information here to insult or attack Christians. Rather, it is provided so that you can know that the claims of Christian missionaries are not self-evident, and that we Jews hold to our own beliefs for reasons every bit as good and valid as the reasons that Christians hold to theirs.

## **To the Christian Reader**

The premise of this pamphlet is that the Bible is not self-explanatory on the matter of human nature, God’s plan, or the messiah. Any reader is required to “seek out” it’s meaning, and people can legitimately come to different conclusions about what the Bible says. We call this “Controversial Texts” because there is (at the very least) two different ways to understand these and other passages and ideas that appear in the Bible.

The author is ever conscious of the diversity in Christian belief. Be aware that this pamphlet is designed as a response to a particular, though very common, vein of Christian thought. If you do not see your own Christian faith accurately portrayed here, then please understand from this that this pamphlet is not addressing you or your particular stream of Christianity.

For two thousand years now Jews have disagreed with many of the Christian readings of the Bible, but that does not mean we despise or disparage Christian faith in any form. Rather, we hope that you will come to understand that there are legitimate non-Christological ways to read the texts that both Jews and Christians hold dear. We hope you also come to appreciate that Jews continue to adhere to our covenant with God in the way we do because we think there is solid Biblical grounds for doing so. Even if you still disagree with our interpretations, if you can come away understanding the logic of how Jews read Scriptures, if you can come away appreciating the idea that there are multiple legitimate ways to interpret the Bible, then this pamphlet will have at least partly fulfilled its purpose.

## **Mankind and the Messiah: Two Different Understandings**

### **What Evangelical Christianity Teaches:**

- 1) Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, all humanity is depraved in nature and deserves death (Original sin).
- 2) You can do nothing on your own to save yourself from going to hell, since your innate corruption overwhelms your good intentions.
- 3) In order to save you from your sinfulness, God sends a messiah to free you from your sins, even though you don't deserve it (Grace).
- 4) To do this, the messiah needs to die in your place (vicarious atonement) by sacrificing himself.
- 5) Only faith in the messiah and accepting the gift of his sacrifice will save you; you cannot do it by your own efforts.
- 6) The messiah is one "person" within God (Trinity).
- 7) The messiah is Jesus of Nazareth, who was killed by the Romans in the 1<sup>st</sup> century (about 2000 years ago).

### **What Judaism Teaches:**

- 1) Humans sin but are not born sinful. You are not condemned before you get started. By living according to God's will (Torah) you are in relationship with God.
- 2) You can rid yourself of guilt for any sin through changing the way you live, prayer and repentance merits forgiveness. (Teshuvah).
- 3) The messiah is God's agent for radical social change. He does not "save souls," he mends the world: Under the messiah war and oppression will end; the world will live in harmony and peace (Tikkun Olam).
- 4) The messiah will transform the world, live out his life as humans do, and die in old age.
- 5) One doesn't need faith in regards to the messiah – His success will be so obvious that no one will question who he is.
- 6) The messiah is a human being, the descendant of King David.
- 7) The messiah has not come because 3, 4, and 5 have not happened.

### **What is a “messiah?”**

The Hebrew term “meshiach” (“messiah” in English) means, “anointed in oil.” In ancient Israel people appointed to high office were symbolically anointed (much like when Europeans make someone king they put a ring of gold on his head). Therefore there have in fact been many “messiahs” in Jewish history; every king and high priest of Israel has been a messiah. The Prophets of Israel also believed there would be a future king who would excel above all the previous messiahs. This “eschatological” (end of times) messiah is what most people are referring to when they use the word messiah.

The key to a Jewish understanding of the eschatological messiah is that with the coming of the messiah, violence, exploitation, and cruelty of all kinds will cease. When it happens, the changes will be so obvious no one will be debating the question of whether or not the messiah has come. Until such a dramatic transformation in human affairs happens, we Jews know the messiah has not yet come. Jews find the role and the achievements of the messiah spelled out both explicitly and poetically in a series of passages, such as Isaiah Chapters 2:1-10 and 11:1-10. Both Christians and Jews agree that these passages describe the eschatological messiah. But there are additionally many other texts that Christians believe refer to the messiah. In some cases, Jews do not agree a certain text refers to the messiah. But even when we agree that a text is “messianic,” we often disagree on the exact meaning of these texts.

Thus, despite the fact that the messianic deeds described in Isaiah 2 and 11 were not accomplished by Jesus, evangelical Christians offer other texts and arguments that they say nevertheless “prove” Jesus is both the messiah and God. Jews note that these “proof texts” are debatable in their interpretation, at times quotes taken out of their non-messianic context, or even occasionally, mistranslations. It is especially important to remember that any English language Bible is really only an interpretation of what is written in the original Hebrew language. A Christian translator is naturally going to offer a translation that best reflects his or her own Christian beliefs, even if it is not the most literal or accurate reading (this cuts both ways, Jewish translations tend to reflect Jewish beliefs).

### **What do Jews believe about Jesus?**

- Jesus lived in the land of Israel in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century.
- He was a charismatic teacher and leader and developed a group of devoted followers.
- After Jesus was killed by the Romans, his followers continued to believe he was special and from them Christianity developed its own beliefs and practices that are different from Judaism.
- That Jesus is not God or the “only begotten son” of God. Jesus was a child of God only in the same sense that we are all children of God.

## **Does the Messiah Die for our Sins?**

Jews believe missionaries can claim Jesus was the Jewish messiah because Christianity *redefined the mission of the messiah*. Instead of bringing peace and harmony to the entire world peace, as described in Isaiah 11, Christians foremost believe the messiah came to save us personally from damnation. To back this up, they quote Isaiah 53, often called the “suffering servant” passage:

### **Controversial Text**

*...He [the servant] was despised, and forsaken of man, a man of pains, knowing disease...Surely our diseases he did bear, and our pains he carried;...Smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed because of our sins; The chastisement of our welfare was upon him, and with his stripes we were healed...But the Eternal chose to crush him by disease, that, if he made himself an offering for guilt, He might see offspring and have long life (JPS).*

Christians believe this is a description of the messiah and it perfectly fits the life and death of Jesus.

### **How Jews Respond to this Claim**

Here are the problems:

- The name “Jesus” does not appear in this text, so applying this to Jesus is a mere supposition.
- The words “messiah,” “House of David” or “Son of Jesse” do not appear in this text, so claiming this describes the messiah is also a mere supposition. No one really knows who the servant is because the text does not tell us. He certainly doesn’t have to be either Jesus or the messiah.
- In fact, the servant doesn’t have to be an individual. In the chapters leading up to this passage, Isaiah repeatedly identifies the *whole Jewish people* as God’s ‘servant’ (41:8-9; 44: 1-2; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3), so it is likely the servant isn’t even a person, only a symbol for Jews.
- The servant is repeatedly described as stricken with disease (vs. 3-4; 10). There is no report of Jesus having any diseases, either literally or metaphorically.
- The servant will not die until he has children (v. 10). We have no report that Jesus ever had children.
- The servant will live a long life because of his self-sacrifice (v. 10); Jesus died young, probably at 33.

So while this is a favorite text of Christian exegetes, it hardly constitutes ‘proof’ of anything, except that biblical texts are subject to widely varying interpretations. Christians have as much right as Jews to understand Scriptures in their own way, but never assume that the Christian interpretation is the only reasonable way to understand what is written there.

## **Is the Messiah God?**

Despite the clear biblical teaching that the Messiah will be a biological descendant of King David (Is. 11:1; Jer. 23:5-6), Trinitarian Christians believe Jesus is “Lord,” by which they mean Jesus is divine. Even though the Bible repeatedly states that God is not a man (Ezekiel 28:2; Exodus 20:2-6; Deut. 4:15-21), Evangelical Christians point to the following passage to argue the messiah is divine:

### **Controversial Text**

*For a child is born to us, a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and he will be called “Wonderful counselor, mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Is. 9:5-6, NIV)*

Christians claim that this refers to Jesus and the symbolic name (especially the *mighty God* part) reveals he is really God incarnate (God in material form).

### **How Jews Respond to this Claim**

Notice, however, the following problems:

- Many Jewish interpreters do not even think this passage refers to the eschatological messiah (though some do).
- Though many names are listed, the name Jesus never appears here, so to think the child is Jesus is, once again, mere supposition.
- Just as significant, *Jesus is never called by any of these names anywhere in the Gospel accounts*. The Christian custom of calling Jesus by terms derived from here, like “Emanuel” and “Prince of Peace,” is entirely post-Biblical. Evidently it didn’t occur to Jesus’ contemporaries that this passage applied to him.
- According to the Gospels, Jesus never governed or held any political, military or other office of power. This passage says the child will hold a *misrah*. *Misrah* means “government” or “office.” To give it a more “spiritual” meaning requires a radical redefinition of this word
- In reality, the name only seems to say the child is “mighty God” because of the comma in the English. In Hebrew this actually reads “Wonderful counselor *is* mighty God...” Many names of ordinary people include praises of God, like the name Samuel, which means, “His name is God.” If we are not to assume from his name that the prophet named Samuel was divine, why should we assume someone named “Elgibor” (mighty God) is divine?

It is important to understand that these are symbolic names given to the child, but they are meant to tell us about God, not about the child. Note too that many modern Christian scholars now acknowledge that this passage does not prove that Isaiah (or any Hebrew Prophet) believed that the hoped for messiah would be God Incarnate.

## **Then what is the Meaning of “Son of God?”**

The Gospels and Paul often use the term “Son of God” to describe Jesus. Christianity now holds that this means Jesus is part of God, preexisting his earthly ministry in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century. But is this what the first Jewish followers of Jesus meant when they used this term?

### **Controversial Text**

*I have installed my king on Mount Zion, my holy mountain;... you are my son; today I have begotten you! (Psalm 2, NIV)*

Christians regard Psalm 2 to be a prophecy about Jesus. They especially are drawn to God speaking the phrase “...you are my son...” as an allusion to the Trinity.

### **How Jews Understand this Concept**

- In II Samuel 7:14, God is quoted as telling David that God will “adopt” Solomon: “I will be his father, and he shall be my son.” This is an ancient expression of the “divine right of kings.” Many ancient kings, at their anointing, were declared to be the adopted sons of their patron gods. This is the thinking reflected in Ps. 2. The “installed” and “today” parts are the give away, for it refers to the day of anointing/coronation. Most Biblical scholars agree this Psalm was probably sung at the coronation ceremonies of the kings of Israel.
- The term “son of God” came to be idiomatic for anyone who has a special relationship with God. The term “son(s) of God” is also applied to Israel as a whole (Deut. 14:1; 32:5,19; Ho. 2:1; 11:1; Isa. 43:6), or to all pious peoples (Ps. 73:15).

In the earlier Gospels, this “adoptionist” understanding seems to apply. Mark, Matthew and Luke apparently believed Jesus was elevated to the status of “son of God” at his baptism (Mark 1:11, Matt. 3:17; Luke 3:22). Especially note during the Annunciation, Luke reports the angel saying, “...he *will* be called the son of the Most High,” not “He *is* the son of the Most High.””

From his letters, Paul evidently believed Jesus became God’s son with his resurrection, as he wrote “Who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness *by his resurrection from the dead* (Romans 1:4).” Paul, a well-educated Jew, also believed being a “son of God” was not unique to Jesus – all believers are sons of God, “For all who are led by the spirit of God are the sons of God...you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry ‘Father!’ It is the spirit itself bearing witness with our spirit that we are sons of God...*and fellow heirs with Christ*” (Ro. 8:13-14). See also Ro. 9:26; 2Co. 6:18; Gal. 3:26.

It is only in later books of the New Testament, such as John and Hebrews, that the idea of Jesus as a pre-existent divine being is fully formulated. This is eventually made a

centerpiece of Christianity by adopting the Nicene Creed. Naturally a Christian will regard this doctrine as eternally true, but a Jewish reader sees this interpretation of “Son of God” as much later historical development that emerged in non-Jewish Christian circles.

While much of Christianity narrowed the application of “son of God” to apply uniquely to Jesus, Judaism has applied it in the widest possible terms. Judaism teaches that since we are all created *b’tzelem elohim*, in God’s image, all humanity are equally “sons” and “daughters” of God.

### **Does God Forgive People only through Blood Sacrifice?**

This sounds strange to Jews, but some forms of Evangelical Christianity will insist God only forgives our sins only when we make a “blood sacrifice.”

#### **Controversial Text**

*It is the blood, as life, that effects expiation (Lev. 17:11, JPS)*

Missionaries like to point to this verse to back up this claim. They then go on to argue that the death of Jesus was the perfect blood sacrifice that God made on our behalf.

Here’s what you need to know:

- God condemns human sacrifice (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5).
- Even in the Book of Leviticus itself, blood is not necessary for the forgiveness of sins, despite what the missionary may tell you. Even while the sacrificial system existed, a contrite poor person need only bring an offering of flour (Lev. 5:11). This teaches us that it was not the blood that was critical, it was the contrite spirit shown when someone would acknowledge his or her sin in public through any sort of sacrifice.
- Throughout the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Bible it is clear that *blood is not necessary* for God’s forgiveness of sins (Numbers 14:20; Lev. 5:11-13; Ezek. 18:21-28; Amos 5:21-22; Hosea 6:6, 14:2; Ps. 51:18-21; Jer. 7:22; Isa 1:11-18; Micah 6:6-8). In fact, it becomes quite clear from these verses *that no sacrifices of any sort* are required for God to forgive us, save the sacrifice of our own pride by admitting we’ve done wrong. Therefore...
- Since the end of the sacrificial system, people’s prayers and sincere repentance are sufficient to be forgiven (see citations above).

Judaism teaches that God is demanding, but does not demand blood and death. In Jewish theology we believe that God is aware He designed us to be morally vulnerable, so He knows we will make mistakes. Judaism teaches that God accommodates that reality by demanding that we repent when we do wrong. When we do, God forgives us. Jews believe God wants from us better living, not death (SEE Ezekiel 18:23-28).



### **What about the Fact that Jesus was A Jew?**

In addition to quoting “proof texts” from the Hebrew Scriptures (Missionaries have hundreds such texts, and Judaism finds different meaning in every one), evangelical and “messianic” Christians will sometimes try to make “logical” arguments to convince Jews that missionary interpretations of Scripture are right. One such “logical” argument is to say that, since Jesus and most of his original followers were Jewish, all Christian ideas are innately Jewish. Some go so far as to say Christianity is really just another form of Judaism.

Here are the problems with this logic:

- Historically, a number of Jews have created movements or taught important things that are not part of Judaism. Albert Einstein was a Jew who revealed many important truths about our universe and many Jewish physicists became his students, but that does not make the science of physics a branch of Judaism. Sigmund Freud was the Jewish founder of psychoanalysis. Many of his disciples were also Jewish. But psychoanalysis is not a Jewish religious movement. In America today a Jew is the leader of a UFO cult! Just because a Jew believes something or thinks of something doesn’t make it Judaism.
- Some of the most important beliefs of orthodox Christianity, such as the Trinity (that God is one but is made up of three persons, including Jesus), were adopted by non-Jewish Christians centuries after Jesus died.
- Even when Christianity kept a Jewish belief, like the belief in the coming of a messiah, they gave radically new interpretations to the concept, changing the meaning from how Jews would understand the same concept.

The reality is that Evangelical Christianity holds beliefs that Jews believe contradict some critical ideas found in the Hebrew Bible, as well as some of the most important teachings of Judaism. Just because a Jew is credited with being the source of Christianity does not make Christianity a form of Judaism. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are three faiths with shared historical roots, but they are each distinct and separate religions. Even the areas of overlap between the three religions reveal points of dramatic difference.

Missionaries tend to unfairly over simplify the complex relationship between Christianity and Judaism in order to make “the sale” to their non-Christian audiences.

### **How Jews View the Authority of the New Testament**

Finally, there is controversy regarding the New Testament itself (which is not part of the Jewish collection of Scriptures). Missionaries will quote passages to you from the New Testament, like where Jesus is quoted as saying, “I am the way, the light and the truth, and no one comes to the Father except through me.” Missionaries make it sound authoritative, but what kind of authority does the New Testament really have?

## Controversial Text

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us...it seemed good to me to write an orderly account...so that you may know the certainty of the thing you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4, NIV)*

Here is what you need to know:

- The New Testament is not an authoritative text for Jews. Jews take it no more or less seriously than the Koran, the Bagavad Gita, the I Ching, or the sacred writings of any other people.
- The Gospel writers did not think they were writing “God’s word.” Only the later Church declared their writings to be inspired by God. This is clear not just from the words of Luke above, but also from the very style of the Gospels. People who believe God is speaking through them do not need to quote other Scriptures to “prove” what they are saying -- they just quote God directly, as the Hebrew Prophets did: “Thus declares the Lord...” Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures virtually never quote other Scriptures. The Gospel writers, on the other hand, quote them right and left (very much in the style of the Talmudic Sages). This reveals that while they were telling what they believed to be true, they still felt they had to quote verses from the Hebrew Bible to justify their particular interpretation of events.
- Like Luke, the various authors composed their Gospels for their own purposes, not because they expected their work to be part of one “Holy Bible.” Later Christian bookbinders gathered up the various Gospel accounts and then bound them together with the Hebrew Scriptures. It is not self-evident all these books belong together. It is a decision made by humans.
- The early Church included four different gospels because there were four popularly accepted versions of Jesus’ life. Rather than say one was right and the others wrong, the Church (admirably) put them together to compare and contrast. The various Gospels in fact have serious disagreements about facts and events in the life of Jesus.
- We cannot be sure Jesus is even quoted accurately. His statements vary from Gospel to Gospel, even when the different Gospels are all describing the same event. Differences between ancient manuscripts also show us that the Gospels were being modified and revised by various people for some time after they were first written.
- There were other Gospel accounts that the Church opted not to include in the New Testament. The Church no doubt had very good reasons for excluding some stories of Jesus, but this only serves to remind us that people, and not God, assembled what is now the Bible.
- A Bible today is not really one book at all. Don’t be fooled by the fact that it is all in one volume. Any Bible is really a library of collected and selected ancient writings.
- In fact there is no one document called the “Bible.” We have today a variety of Bibles, each containing different numbers of Scriptural Books. Religious

communities chose the Bible they use, and their choices reflect their theology and their biases. The Protestant Bible collection is different from the Catholic Bible collection, which is different from the Orthodox Christian Bible collection, which is different from the Jewish TaNaKH. No one collection is “right” or “best,” except for the particular community that put it together.

The ultimate thing to understand is that the New Testament is an authoritative text for Christians because Christians choose to accept its authority. There is nothing about the NT that makes it uniquely wise, or true, or reliable compared to any other teachings or religious documents. It suffers the same problems and errors associated with all other ancient texts. Therefore the New Testament is correctly understood to be an object of Christian faith rather than a document that “proves” the validity of Christian beliefs.

### **In Conclusion**

While Jews want to live in respect and harmony with all our fellow citizens in America, the aggressive efforts of some Christian communities have us forsake our faith requires a frank and honest response. Clearly, such debates between Judaism and Christianity over the meaning of Scriptures have gone on for two thousand years and will not be put to rest by reading these few pages. Still, these examinations of controversial texts are an effort to respectfully disagree with certain Christian claims regarding the Hebrew Bible. This pamphlet is meant foremost to strengthen Jewish faith and pride in the face of those who claim that Judaism is an inadequate, erroneous, unbiblical, or dead faith. It is the author’s hope this booklet will also further understanding about the legitimate differences that arise between people of faith.

### **For Further Reading:**

Samdmel, S. *We Jews and Jesus*  
\_\_\_\_\_, *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament*  
Berger and Wyschograd, *Jews and “Jewish Christianity”*  
Wilson & Rudin, *Evangelicals and Jews in an Age of Pluralism*  
Maccoby, H, *The Myth Maker*  
Talmudge, F., *Disputation and Dialogue*  
Crossen, M, *The Historical Jesus*  
Harrison & Falk, *Jews and Christians*