

Why did the Jews fail to understand the prophecies pointing to the Messiah? A Series on Messianic Prophecies: Part 1

Readers of the Bible do not gain a sense of God's glory until the Exodus. It appeared visibly within a cloud as fire (Ex 16:7-10; 24:16-17), led the nation of Israel (Ex 13:21) and consumed the sacrifices in the Tabernacle (Lev 9:23-24). God's glory was a quality that encompassed His greatness / authority and His moral perfection / beauty; it was a quality that human beings could recognize and respond in worship, praise, confess and petition.

When God made His covenant with Moses, He intended that Israel would be a kingdom of priests (Ex 19:6) and His Law be taught by the Levitical Priesthood (Lev 24:8; Deut 27:9-10). Obedience to the Law was to make the nation of Israel holy to God (Ex 22:31; Deut 7:6; 14:2).

Thus the Old Testament was composed so that His "kingdom of priests" would recognize and acknowledge the glory of God, all of which pointed to the Messiah the manifestation of God's glory (John 1:1-4; 17:1-5) in recognition of the nation of Israel's failure to honor their covenant commitments (Ezek 36:22-25).

It is in this context that is puzzling. While the Hebrew Old Testament spoke of Messiah as these examples found in the Septuagint explicitly bear out, the first century teacher of the Law was unable to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. This begs the question "why?"

The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers gathered themselves together, against the Lord, and against his **Christ**; saying, Let us break through their bonds, and cast away their yoke from us. He that dwells in the heavens shall laugh them to scorn, and the Lord shall mock them. Then shall he speak to them in his anger, and trouble them in his fury. But I have been made king by him on Sion his holy mountain, declaring the ordinance of the Lord: the Lord said to me, Thou art my Son, to-day have I begotten thee. Ask of me, and I will give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the ends of the earth for thy possession. Thou shalt rule them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces as a potter's vessel. Now therefore understand, ye kings: be instructed, all ye that judge the earth. (Septuagint - Ps 2:2-9)

And thou shalt know and understand, that from the going forth of the command for the answer and for the building of Jerusalem until **Christ** the prince there shall be seven weeks, and sixty-two weeks; and then the time shall return, and the street shall be built, and the wall, and the times shall be exhausted. And after the sixty-two weeks, the anointed one shall be destroyed, and there is no judgment in him: and he shall destroy the city and the sanctuary with the prince that is coming: they shall be cut off with a flood, and to the end of the war which is rapidly completed he shall appoint the city to desolations. (Septuagint - Dan 9:25-26)

In His criticism of the teachers of the Law, Jesus provides an insight that serves as an explanation and warning that is relevant today.

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life. I do not receive glory from men; but I know you, that you do not have the love of God in yourselves. I have come in My Father's name, and you do not receive Me; if another comes in his own name, you will receive him. How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the one and only God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; the one who accuses you is Moses, **in whom you have set your hope**. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?" (John 5:39-47)

While the common rabbinical belief at the time was the more one reads the Torah, the more prepared one was for eternal life, the reality was that the Pharisees devoted their study to the Midrash – the commentaries of the text, whose interpretation may vary according to the rabbinical school. Rather than devote themselves to the Word of God, they devoted themselves to the commentaries of prominent men.

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It is in this context that the Pharisees seek glory from men instead of Jesus the Christ. As a consequence of misunderstanding the Old Testament, Jesus points out to the Jews their misguided view that God's favor was based on their relationship and obedience to Moses. Shortly after, Jesus explicitly shows their error in biblical hermeneutics: 1) Moses was not the source of manna from heaven (John 6:30-32) and 2) people who ate the manna died (John 6:57-58).

By calling the Pharisees and teachers of the Law hypocrites (Matt 15:1-9), Jesus draws attention to the authority they live by - their tradition of Jewish religious law rather than by the commandment of God. The Jewish process of Bible study / exposition of the Law of Moses was known as the Midrash Halakha. These rabbinic interpretations were often regarded as corresponding to the real meaning of the scriptural texts, considered authoritative, and formed the basis of Jewish religious laws. This included the addition of new laws to the Law of Moses.

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." And He answered and said to them, "**Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?** For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God," he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you:

'This people honors Me with their lips,
But their heart is far away from Me.
'But in vain do they worship Me,
Teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'" (Matt 15:1-9; Mark 7:5-8)

Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 29:13 draws a comparison to the circumstances that prompted Isaiah's prophetic judgment in his time. Then as now, worship is vain when it is based on the precepts of Pharisees and scribes (i.e. codified erroneous biblical interpretation and religious practice) whose doctrine lacked any basis in God's word rather than on one's love for God and His word. Jesus is challenging the theological validity of halakha tradition and its teaching.

Throughout the gospels is the tension between the Pharisees / teachers of the Law and Jesus in regard to one's relationship with the Law.

Jewish religious leaders taught God as the Lawgiver who approved of and rewarded those who kept the Law.

Jesus taught God as the heavenly Father who, in an act of love for His people, sent His Son to fulfill the Law to restore and redeem in faithful commitment to His covenant promises.

The tension breaks when Jesus pronounces his woes upon these Jewish teachers (Matt 23:13-33; Luke 11:37-52), and He does so with judgment in mind. Ignorant of rather than knowing God's word as the woes condemn, the teachers of the Law were hypocritical, lawless and led others astray.

Whether it is in correction of the Pharisees' biblical hermeneutics (i.e. Matt 19:4-6), it is of significance that, when referring to Old Testament prophecies pointing to Himself, only Jesus asks this question, "Have you never read?" (Matt 12:3-8; 21:15-16, 42-44 [Mark 12:10-11]).

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Jesus makes clear the risks of studying a commentary in lieu of a careful study of the biblical text: the risk of poor theology and unacceptable worship. His criticism of the Pharisees forces us to ask ourselves, "how objective is our approach to Bible study?"

And tradition is not equivalent to God's word and nor carry the same authority as the Bible.

If you seek to establish your Bible study on a more objective basis, consider a book on biblical hermeneutics (see the webpage: Defining Biblical Hermeneutics at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/13reference/1hermeneutics_index.aspx) or go through this online tutorial (see the webpage: Defining Biblical Hermeneutics at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/5system_skillbuilder/intro1.aspx).

References:

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