Let’s Get Biblical: A Review

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I was recently asked to help with a situation in a local congregation in the ICOC fellowship which involved a group of members who had begun to believe in Jewish-oriented interpretations of the Old and New Testaments. Some had either lost their faith or were on the verge of losing their faith in the Christian idea of who Jesus is based on challenges to Christianity coming from Jewish criticisms of Christian interpretation of the Scriptures. Specifically, it was pointed out that the podcasts and writings of a Jewish apologist Rabbi Tovia Singer played a role in creating doubts on the part of this group of believers. For this reason, I read a two-volume set of anti-Christian arguments by Rabbi Singer titled, *Let’s Get Biblical*. The basic thesis of this two-volume set is that Christians have hijacked the Old Testament and misinterpreted it so as to create a false picture of the Jewish Messiah. Singer claims that Christians have created a Messiah out of the merely human person known as Jesus of Nazareth. He also claims that the New Testament does not provide an accurate depiction of the life and ministry of Jesus, but that it is a semi-fictional distortion of the life of a merely human person in order to falsely create a God/Messiah out of a man who never made any such claims about himself.

So, what is the content of this anti-Christian writing? It is a not-very-well organized set of short essays as well as questions and answers from Singer over the years of his ministry to de-convert Jews from Christianity. More specifically, it is a polemic against the work of the evangelical group known as Jews For Jesus. The content of this collection of essays is a mixture of attempts to undermine Christian claims about messianic prophecies, to disprove the Christian claim that Jesus is God-in-the-flesh, and to expose the tragic history of antisemitism on the part of Christian groups throughout the history of Christianity. It includes horrifying anecdotes of antisemitic Christian writings and actions to suppress Jews. But it also includes helpful explanations of Jewish understanding of their Scripture and especially the means of salvation. Unfortunately, the entire series is marred by emotional attacks on the motives of Christian translators and misleading and sometimes disingenuous statements about the text of the Old and New Testaments.

Because both volumes of Singer’s series are haphazardly arranged, I will not go through the text of the two-volume set in order. Instead, I will analyze the essays based on the kinds of content. I will first discuss Singer’s attempts to undermine the Christian use of the Old Testament text to prove that Jesus is the Messiah. Then, I will describe some of the helpful insight that Singer provides to Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament regarding the means of redemption. I will follow this with a discussion of Singer’s attempts to undermine the Christian understanding of who Jesus is, especially the Christian belief in the deity of Christ. I will spend less time on Singer’s emotional but generally well-spoken attempts to call out anti-Jewish sentiment in historical Christianity.

**Messianic Prophecy**

Singer uses two strategies in order to undermine Christian claims that Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament historical messianic prophecies. First, he attempts to “prove” that both the New Testament writers, and modern Christian commentators either misquote or misinterpret the relevant Old Testament passages. Second, he argues that Jesus did not fulfill the actual Old Testament messianic expectation. In other words, he claims that the Christian messianic passage claims are false—that these passages are not messianic, and that the actual *bona fide* messianic passages were not fulfilled by Jesus. For his purpose, which is to undermine faith in Jesus as Savior of mankind, it is essential to disprove Christian messianic claims. For this reason, Singer spends a lot of time trying to do this.

For example, Singer claims (Vol. 1, p. 37) that the famous passage Psalm 22:16 is not messianic. “For Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men have encircled me. They have pierced my hands and my feet.” Singer says that “The Church deliberately mistranslated and lifted numerous verses in Psalm 22 and placed them in the mouth of Jesus.” Singer tells us that a proper translation of the passage is, “For dogs have encompassed me; a company of evildoers have inclosed (sic) me; like a lion, they are at my hands and my feet.” He tells us that “The King James version deliberately mistranslated the Hebrew word *kaari* as “pierced,” rather than “like a lion, thereby drawing the reader to the false conclusion that this Psalm is describing the Crucifixion.” This claim of Singer is misleading at best and deceitful at worst. What Singer fails to point out is that the Dead Sea Scrolls and many Masoretic texts actually have the word *kara*, which means pierced. In addition, the Greek Septuagint translation has a Greek word that unambiguously means pierced in this passage, not lion.

Singer has the audacity to claim that the Septuagint translation with a Greek synonym of the English word pierced was created by Christians in an attempt by those Christians to turn the passage into one with messianic implications. This claim is simply absurd. Singer correctly points out that the original Septuagint in about 250 BC was only a translation of the Pentateuch, which did not include the Psalms, but he then goes on to make the completely insupportable claim that the Septuagint translation of the Psalms was made well after the church began, and that the highly biased translation was done by Christians. Although we do not know precisely when the full text of the Old Testament was translated into the Greek that we call the Septuagint was made, we can be quite certain it was before the first century! Most likely it was completed by the first half of the second century BC. We know the Septuagint predates Christianity for several reasons, not the least of which is that the New Testament writers generally quoted from the Septuagint, not the Hebrew. As far as I know, no serious scholar will support Singer’s contention that Christian bias produced the Septuagint translation.

Singer makes the insupportable claim that Christians altered the text of the Septuagint in order to bolster their false claims that Jesus is the Messiah. Let us ask a simple question. Which is more likely; that the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint, both of which are from before the time of Christ was changed by the Christians to make it Messianic, or that the Masoretic text, which comes from the eighth century AD, was changed by Jews to make Psalm 22:16 appear *not* to be messianic? This is a very easy question to answer! Did the Jews change their Bible to prevent fellow Jews from converting to Christianity, or is the textual change in the Masoretic an accidental copying error? The answer is that we do not know for sure. What we can be quite positive of is that Singer is wrong. He is guilty of doing what he falsely claims Christians have done—of allowing his presuppositions to determine his interpretation of the information.

And let us look more closely at the proposed translation of Singer. He has “like a lion, they are at my hands and my feet.” First of all, there is no Hebrew word in the text which is translated “like a.” This is inserted into the text by Singer. Otherwise, the word lion makes no sense in the text. Without these interpolated words, but assuming the word *kaari*, the Hebrew reads something like this: …has encircled me, lion my hands and my feet. The word lion makes no sense in the context of the Hebrew. Given that the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint and many Masoretic texts have the word for pierced, which fits the context more smoothly than lion, and given that the Masoretic text is a later one, no wonder nearly all Bible translations use the word pierced in the passage, but include lion in a footnote. Singer is flat wrong on this passage, and he has the nerve to claim that Christians have deliberately produced deceitful mistranslations. If anyone deserves this accusation, it is Singer.

Rabbi Singer treats a number of other passages that Christians consider to be messianic similarly. I wish I had the time and space to analyze all of them. This includes Psalm 110:1 (“the Lord said to my Lord”) Isaiah 7:14 (“the virgin will be with child”), Isaiah 9:6 (“to us a child is born”), Zechariah 12:10 (“they will look on the one they have pierced”), Micah 5:2 (but you, Bethlehem Ephrathah… out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel), Isaiah 53 and more. In some cases he repeats the charge of willfully false translation (Psalm 110:1, Isaiah 7:14). In each case of proposed Christian tampering he ignores the fact that the common biblical translations are not inventions, but are based on textual variants which usually support more strongly the supposed “Christian” translation than Singer’s Jewish translation. Singer repeatedly and ungraciously impugns the motives of Christians, implying that they are deliberately deceiving readers of the Old Testament. They “tampered with the words.” They “purposely changed the translation.” They “deliberately sought to mask King David’s teaching,” (Vol 1, p. 73-74) and so forth. How does he know that the committee that created the Revised Standard Version were deliberately deceitful? Does he know them personally?

In the case of Isaiah 53, Singer’s tactic is different. For this rather obviously messianic passage, he claims that the suffering servant of the passage is not the Messiah at all, but he is the nation of Israel. In this case, Singer is not without some support from scholars for his interpretation. Even some Christian scholars agree with Singer, so this passage, and Singer’s criticism deserves some attention. The possibly confusing fact about Isaiah is that the suffering servant is sometimes clearly Israel personified, but other times he is clearly the Messiah. There are at least four so-called servant songs (Isaiah 42:1-9, 49:1-13, 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12). In some of the servant songs, the servant is clearly the nation of Israel. For example, in Isaiah 42:8 we have “But you, Israel, my servant Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend…” Here the nation of Israel is God’s servant, and the word servant is in the singular. Similarly, in Isaiah 49:3 the servant is Israel. “He said to me, ‘You are my servant Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.”

However, there are other passages in the servant songs for which it does not make sense to identify the servant with the nation of Israel, but perfect sense to see the servant to be the Messiah. The key passage to understand this is Isaiah 49:1-7. In the first three verses, God’s suffering servant is Israel, but in Isaiah 49:4 God tells his people that he has rejected them as his servant to the nations. Beginning in Isaiah 49:5 God tells us that the role of the servant will be to “bring Jacob back to him.” In 49:6, the servant will “restore the tribes of Jacob.” Israel cannot restore Israel and Jacob cannot restore Jacob. The servant will be “a light to the Gentiles” and the means by which “salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6) This is a rather obvious reference to the role of the Messiah, not to the people of Israel. Naturally, Singer does not quote from Isaiah 49:4-7.[[1]](#footnote-1)

With regard to Singer’s point, we can concede that many Jews before Christ might have thought the suffering servant of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 was Israel itself. But the fact is that many other Jews considered this section to be messianic. A simple, common-sense reading of this passage, either in Hebrew or in translated English will lead to the conclusion that, like in Isaiah 49:4-7, the suffering servant of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is a single person, not a nation, and that this person singularly suffers, is despised (v. 3) pierced (v. 5), oppressed (v. 7), silent when accused (v. 7), and cut off from the land of the living (v. 8). It is true that Israel was oppressed, and despised, but not that she was pierced, silent when accused, or cut off from the land of the living.

Singer claims that Isaiah 53 cannot be about Jesus, because it prophesies that the servant will “see his offspring.” He points out that Jesus did not have any offspring. True, but from the Christian perspective, Jesus has plenty of offspring. We who are disciples of Jesus are his children. Honestly, this is a fairly natural interpretation, supported by many other Old Testament passages. This brings me to a very important point in thinking about the anti-Christian polemic of Rabbi Singer. He argues from a definite presupposition. His presupposition is that a particular common Jewish view of the role of the Messiah is certainly the correct one. He assumes that the correct interpretation of the Jewish Messiah is that he is a human being who comes to the earth as a conquering king who brings back the political glory of Israel and who brings in the Messianic age. In the Messianic age, the Law of Moses, and worship under that law will rule the earth. Any interpretation which does not align itself with this presupposed interpretation is wrong *a priori* t*o* Singer and his like. End of story. No need to discuss alternative interpretations. To presuppose one’s conclusion before examining the facts is a problematic approach to a discussion of the question.

Which brings me to the second means by which he argues that Jesus of Nazareth is not the Jewish Messiah. To Singer, the only messianic prophecies are the ones which paint the Messiah as a conquering king or one who brings in the final, utopian Messianic age. Let us note that there are messianic passages which point in this direction. For example, there is Zechariah 9:9-10. “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.” Singer correctly points out that Christians have a habit of removing Zechariah 9:9 from its context, which includes 9:10. Let us not make that error. We can also concede that Zechariah 9:9-10 fits quite well Singer’s (and many other Jews as well) view of the Messiah. But let me point out that everything in this passage can be interpreted in a way consistent with a Christian understanding of the Kingdom of God as well. Yes, Jesus is a victorious king, but not an earthly king of an earthly kingdom. Jesus is a triumphant king, but he was at the same time a remarkably lowly king. And Jesus proclaimed peace to the nations. In fact, he is the Prince of Peace. He frees people enslaved to sin from waterless pits (v. 11). Other bona fide messianic passages which point toward a conquering king are Isaiah 2:4, and Isaiah 11:6-8 (Vol. 2, p. 60-62). As Christians, in fairness, we ought to acknowledge that these passages fit the accepted Jewish interpretation, but polemicists such as Singer ought to similarly acknowledge that the “Christian” understanding of these passages is also not unreasonable.

It should be pointed out that there are two groups in this debate, and that both groups tend to bring presuppositions to the table. As Christians, we ought to acknowledge that we view these messianic prophecies through a Christian lens, as did Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Two points here. First of all, as Christians we need to be honest brokers in this. We need to remind ourselves of our presuppositions, and we need to be able to look at the Scripture through other lenses. Let us never behave as Singer does in his highly biased take on the Scripture. The problem is that he refuses to acknowledge his bias and to present alternative possible views. The second point is that it just so happens that the Christian view is the correct one. Viewing information through a correct presupposition is more likely to lead to a correct conclusion than viewing the same information through an incorrect one. How do I know my view is the correct one? Because Jesus was raised from the dead! Jesus told the teachers of the Law that the Hebrew Scriptures testify about him (John 5:39). I am convinced that the facts overwhelmingly support this claim. If I am right, then my acknowledged presupposition is correct. But I get ahead of myself here.

There is a lot more on messianic prophecies in both volumes of *Let’s Get Biblical*, but time and space does not allow me to treat each of Singer’s points. Suffice it to say that his criticisms of Christian messianic prophecies vary from reasonable but not convincing to rather poor and even dishonest arguments.

**Jewish Ideas About Redemption**

A second broad area of criticism by Singer of the Christian understanding of Scripture involves claims on his part that Christians have misunderstood both what the Old Testament says and what modern-day Jews understand with regard to redemption and forgiveness of sins. To be honest with the reader, there is a good deal of truth in Singer’s charge that Christians have an incorrect understanding of redemption in the Old Testament. However, as I will show, Singer’s final analysis is flawed. Again, this is because he argues presuppositionally that any uniquely Christian idea about redemption and salvation must be utterly false. The Christian presupposition is that Jesus is God-in-the-flesh, and therefore anything he says about how we are saved is certainly true. If Jesus is right, then Singer is wrong. Having said that, unlike Singer’s rather weak arguments about Christian messianic prophecies, in this second category, he has valid points for us to learn from.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The essence of Singer’s argument is this: He claims that Christians falsely believe and that the New Testament falsely teaches that atonement is only achieved through the shedding of sacrificial blood. He argues that in the Hebrew Scripture atonement is gained through three means—by ritual sacrifice, by repentance and by charity. The uncomfortable fact for us is that in his argument he reveals some flaws in the commonly accepted view of Christians about what the Old Testament teaches on atonement. The principal theory of atonement among Protestant and Evangelical Christians is what is known as penal substitutionary atonement. This is the idea that we are saved because *and only because* Jesus took the penalty that was due to us by his sacrificial death on the cross. The death of Jesus had the principal result of appeasing God’s wrath. As a student of the Bible, I have come to understand that this is only part of the story and, in a small way, Singer has helped my thinking on this.

Let us examine Singer’s claims about the means of redemption in the Hebrew Scripture. He tells us (Vol. 1, p. 68-74) that the blood sacrifices of the Law of Moses, and in particular the Sin and Guilt Offerings were only intended to atone for unintentional sin. In this case, although this will come as a surprise to many Christian believers, the Rabbi is correct. Many passages demonstrate the truth of the claim that only unintentional sin was atoned for through blood sacrifice. Ritual blood sacrifice did not bring forgiveness of willful sin. For example, there is Numbers 15:22-24, in which God tells his people, “Now if you as a community *unintentionally* fail to keep any of these commandments the Lord gave Moses—any of the Lord’s commandments to you through him, from the day the Lord gave them and continuing through the generations to come—and if this is done *unintentionally*, without the community being aware of it, then the whole community is to offer a young bull…” Later in the same chapter, in Numbers 15:30-30 we are told, “But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or foreigner, blasphemes the Lord and must be cut off from the people of Israel… their guilt remains on them.” Other passages which show that the Jewish blood sacrifices were only for unintentional sins of the nation or of individuals include Leviticus 4:1 and Leviticus 13, 5:14-15.

The distinction between unintentional and willful sin is carried into the New Testament. In Hebrews 10:26, in what is perhaps the most solemn warning in the entire New Testament, we are told that, “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only the fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.” The Hebrew writer goes on to allude to Deuteronomy 17:2-7 regarding the consequences of willful (as opposed to unintentional) sins. The unforgivable sin of 1 John 5:16 is the same as the blaspheming of the Holy Spirit in Matthew 12:32, which is to continually and to willfully sin against God. It is to “treat as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them” and to “insult the Spirit.” (Hebrews 10:29)

The New Testament teaching is that the blood of Christ will atone for a seemingly unlimited amount of unintentional sin, but that there is a limit to the level of willful sin and rebellion which the blood of Jesus will atone for. At some point, after continued and deliberate sinful rebellion, we will have fallen away and lost our salvation.

This idea is found in the Old Testament, although expressed differently. What, then, is the means by which rebellion and willful sin is atoned for in the Hebrew Scripture? If it is not the sin and guilt offering, then what? The answer that our Jewish friends, including Rabbi Singer will give us is the same that is found in the Old Testament. All of us sin willfully at one time or another. The solution, biblically, is to repent. This is the second of Singer’s list of the means of atonement in the Old Testament.

But what about Hebrews 9:22 (“In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”), and what about Leviticus 17:11 (“For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar.”)? Notice that, as the writer of Hebrews refers to the Law of Moses, he tells us that “the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood.” Nearly everything, but not everything. And as Singer correctly states, (Vol. 1, p. 69) “Leviticus 17:11 does not imply that the only method of atonement is the shedding of blood.” Blood sacrifices were necessary to obtain ceremonial cleanness and to allow the Jews to worship him. But full atonement only came upon repentance. Leviticus clearly emphasized blood atonement over repentance, but the prophets emphasize the role of repentance in salvation over that of ceremonial blood sacrifices. It is not that Leviticus is right and the prophets wrong or vice versa. It is that both are correct, but the purpose of Leviticus and of the prophets are somewhat different. Let us say this again. The purpose of the ceremonial sacrifices in the Law of Moses was to atone for unintentional sin for the purpose of allowing the Jews to be ceremonially clean and to worship God (Hebrews 9:9-10). These sacrifices did not atone for willful rebellion.

One of the great mysteries to many Christians is how easily Jews moved on in their religion when sacrifices were no longer made after the final destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. How could they even think of themselves as Jews without sacrifices? What about their sins? To Jews this is not a great mystery, because both before and after the destruction of the temple they have always connected forgiveness more strongly with repentance than with blood sacrifice. To the Christian with our presuppositions, and especially when we read Hebrews Ch 8-10, this seems surprising, but a careful reading of the Old Testament will verify this idea. For the Christian as well as for the Jew under Moses, atonement required both blood sacrifice and repentance.

Singer strongly opposes the Augustinian/Calvinistic teaching that we are totally depraved due to original sin. He denies what Calvin taught, which is that we are helpless to do anything to respond to God—that we are incapable of repenting before we are saved, and that we are saved by faith alone. We can agree with Rabbi Singer that those who are saved and those who are lost is not predestined by God. We can agree with Singer’s use of Deuteronomy 30:19-20 in which God pleads with his people to “choose life.” We are with Singer on this! Calvinism downplays our ability to repent on our own, and therefore downplays the role of repentance in our salvation. Here we can agree with Singer and disagree with Augustinian/Calvinist theology and teaching. Repentance on our part is a necessary part of our response to Christ and is required in order for us to be forgiven of sins (Acts 2:36-41). There is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood, but there is also no forgiveness without repentance.

The Hebrew Scripture is replete with passages which show that God preferred a broken and repentant heart to mere ceremonial sacrifices. All of us can quote quite readily such passages as Psalm 51:16. “You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.” To this we can add 1 Samuel 15:22, Micah 6:6-8, Isaiah 1:11-14, Deuteronomy 30:19-20 and many more.

Let us listen to Singer on this subject, and let us humbly learn from our Jewish friends, but let us also not forget that Rabbi Singer, despite his wisdom on the role of repentance in atonement, is still far from a correct biblical perspective on salvation! For example, Singer misinterprets the passages above to support his anti-Christian rhetoric. In Vol. 1, p. 72-73 he incorrectly claims that the Old Testament writers repeatedly “belittle” blood sacrifice. He claims that “the Book of Psalms and the prophets Isaiah, Micah, Hosea and Jeremiah discourage sinners from relying on blood sacrifices as a method to atone for sins.” He hyperbolically declares that “Isaiah… repeatedly and resoundingly trivializes the blood sacrificial system.” We are talking about a priest here! It is not surprising that a Jew, whose compatriots have not included blood sacrifice in their religious observance for nearly two millennia, would say this, but it is not true! What is true is that, both in the Old and in the New Testaments, blood sacrifice alone, if not combined with a repentant heart, does not lead to full atonement for sins. What God teaches through the passages mentioned in the previous paragraph is that it is a deadly mistake for the Jews to rely fully on ceremonial blood sacrifices without giving their repentant heart to God. Christians certainly agree with this! Which is harder for us to maintain, ritual religion or a repentant heart toward God? Well, that is an easy questions, and it explains why God repeatedly warns the Jews not to rely in an unbalanced way on ritual sacrifices and offerings. What God wants from us is a broken and contrite heart. Singer claims that OT writers “belittle” blood sacrifice and repeatedly downplay their role. This is not accurate. What is true is that without repentance, blood sacrifice atones for nothing. Well, Christians agree with this!

Singer argues that blood sacrifice is much weaker in atoning for sin than repentance because it is only useful for removing unintentional sins. He argues that accidental sin is less sinful than outright rebellion. There is a grain of truth here. In fact, Hebrews 10:26-31, which we already looked at, supports this contention. However, he then concludes that the Christian belief that our salvation depends on the blood sacrifice of Jesus is therefore disproved. Again, this is a presuppositional argument, not a biblical one. We have already argued that the Old and the New Testaments both teach the connection between blood sacrifice and repentance to achieve atonement. If Jesus, the one who raised Lazarus from the dead, who walked on water, who turned water to wine, who fulfilled all messianic expectations, and who was himself raised from the dead tells us that “This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins,” (Matthew 26:28) then I am prepared to believe that the shedding of sacrificial blood is necessary for our forgiveness of sins.

The Rabbi argues (Vol. 2, p. 64) that Ezekiel 18 rules out the requirement for blood to be connected with forgiveness of sins, and that it also specifically proves that a righteous person cannot die vicariously for the sin of another. Here he is taking Ezekiel 18 out of context. Now, it is true that God tells us in Ezekiel 18 that “the soul who sins is the one who will die.” (v. 20) and “Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall.” (v. 30) However, in the context of this chapter and Ezekiel 33 as well, God is talking about his justice. On judgment day, we will only be responsible before God for the sins we have committed, not the sins of others. Also, our forgiveness requires that we repent of our sins. This is a consistent teaching of both the Old and the New Testament. However, statements in Ezekiel 18 do not disprove the need for sacrifice to remove sin. We should not try to make one Bible truth cancel another Bible truth. Speaking of falsely quoting the Scripture, in Vol. 1, p. 77 Singer claims to find the quote “The righteous man cannot die for the sins of the wicked” in Ezekiel 18. I ask Singer, what verse are you quoting here? I do not find a verse that even comes close to saying this! We can agree with Singer that God outlaws human sacrifice unambiguously. The involuntary taking of one human life in order to propitiate God and to provide forgiveness to another human is an abomination. However, the willing, voluntary sacrifice of Jesus, who is “the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.” (Revelation 13:8) is another matter. It is a misappropriation of Scripture to use Ezekiel 18 to prove differently.

Which brings me to another of Singer’s anti-Christian arguments. He claims that there is absolutely no connection between the sacrifice of the lambs at Passover and our salvation. Neither is the Passover lamb connected to the role of the Messiah (Vol. 2, p. 70-71). Of course, Singer is free to make this claim, but I believe that he is simply wrong, and that his conclusion is the result of his Jewish presupposition. In fact, the Jewish firstborn were saved from death by the blood of the Passover lamb, and it was this, the tenth plague, which ultimately caused Pharaoh to finally let God’s people free from slavery in Egypt. There is a clear symbolic relationship between the blood of the Passover lamb and salvation. This is what the Jews remind themselves every year at their Seder. The type/antitype relationship between the sacrificial lamb, whose blood was placed on a wooden beam and the blood of Jesus, who was also killed on the eve of the Passover, and whose blood was also shed on a wooden cross-beam is impossible to miss. That is, unless we choose to not notice the connection because we do not want to see it. I agree with Paul that “Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed.” (1 Corinthians 5:7)

This brings me to my last point in this section of the essay. Singer claims that there are three things which are causal of forgiveness of sins in the Hebrew Scripture. They are ritual sacrifice, repentance and charity/almsgiving. He claims, falsely, that blood sacrifice is the weakest of the three and that the apostles belittle this category of atonement. But what about charity? What about almsgiving? Does the Old Testament teach that our helping of the poor atones for sins, as Rabbi Singer claims? I say no. I say this because there is neither any theological nor any scriptural support for this claim. As “proof” of his contention that charity atones for sin, Singer has a very short list of Old Testament passages. He uses the KJV translation of Proverbs 10:2; “Treasures of wickedness will not avail, but charity will save from death.” First of all, no modern translation has the word charity in Proverbs 10:2. All have something like “righteousness delivers from death.” The Hebrew word here is *sadaq* which is translated as righteousness, innocence, not guilty, acquitted or vindicated. It does not carry the connotation of the current English word charity. Charity had a different meaning when the Authorized Version was made over four hundred years ago. Singer falsely uses Proverbs 11:4 in the same way. As further “proof” that charity or almsgiving atones for sin, he uses passages such as Proverbs 16:6, Proverbs 21:3 and Hosea 6:6, all of which teach that kindness and mercy to the poor is preferred by God to sacrifice. “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” (Hosea 6:6) To this we can give a hearty Amen! Jesus repeats this important biblical idea that mercy is more important than religious observance (Matthew 9:13). All true, but these passages do not connect redemption with charity. Let me put it this way. There is not a single verse, either in the Old or the New Testament which even remotely approaches teaching that almsgiving atones for sin. Singer is simply wrong on this.

**The Deity of Christ**

This brings us to our last major point about Singer’s books. He makes a two-fold claim. First of all, he tells us that Christian attempts to support the deity of Christ or to find anything like trinity in the Hebrew Scripture utterly fail. Second, he makes the bold statement that Jesus of Nazareth never claimed to be God. In fact, he goes so far as to tell us that Jesus never even claimed the mantel of Messiah. He attempts to prove that messianic claims were created by the leaders of the Christian church late in the first century, and that the idea of the deity of Jesus was invented by the Orthodox Church in the third or fourth century. Of course, these are not new claims, but we will take the time to discuss them in the context of Singer’s book. On the first point, that Christians have at times used questionable hermeneutics to “prove” that the idea of trinity is in the Hebrew Scripture, Singer has some good points to make, but on the second point, in which he implies that the authors of the New Testament lied about the claims of Jesus, his argument falls flat.

Can the idea of trinity be found in the Old Testament? Christians have gone to great lengths to try to prove this. Some of these attempts have been questionable, and Singer points this out (Vol. 1, p. 137, Vol 2, p. 146, 153-155). For example, it has been a common Christian claim that Genesis 1:2, “and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters,” is proof that the Holy Spirit is found as a separate person of the trinity in the Old Testament. This is a rather weak argument. Certainly Jews would not have seen it this way, and it is questionable that the passage is even talking about the Holy Spirit, as opposed to the Father or the Son in this passage. Is it possible this is evidence for the person of the Holy Spirit in Genesis? Perhaps, but not likely, and it is a poor proof-text for trinity. It should not be used to try to prove that the idea of trinity is in the Hebrew Scripture. Similarly, Christians have argued that Genesis 1:26, “Let us make mankind in our image” is evidence of a multi-person godhead. The great majority of scholars, either Christian or Jewish, tell us that this is an example of the “royal we.” Either that, or some propose that God is speaking to what is sometimes called a heavenly council. In any case, this passage is a dubious proof of trinity in the Hebrew Scripture, and Singer rightly points this out. Along the same lines, Christian attempts to prove that a three-person godhead is in the Old Testament have tried to use the fact that God is referred to as *Elohim*, especially in Genesis, which is a plural name for God. Singer is right that this is an idiomatic way to refer to the one God of Israel, and is very weak evidence for the idea of trinity.

This begs the question: Are there any passages in the Old Testament which imply the separate personhood of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit? The answer is yes! For example, there is Zechariah 11:12-13, in which God prophetically describes the thirty pieces of silver that were paid to Judas to betray Jesus as “the handsome price at which they priced *me*.” Here, the Messiah is called “me,” when it is God speaking. Other passages that have strong implications related to the Christian idea of trinity include Psalm 110:1, where David says, “The Lord says to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand…’” Peter uses this as a messianic reference to Jesus as Lord in Acts 2:34-35. Singer pushes back hard against this, claiming that the second word lord carries no implication of deity, but his argument is weak, principally based on his presuppositional thinking. To these examples, we can add the messianic prophecy Isaiah 9:1-6, which speaks of the Messiah as follows: “And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Here we can see the three persons of the Christian godhead.

Let me summarize the Old Testament evidence of a triune God in a more simplistic way than I would like, for the sake of time and space. Singer makes good points when he criticizes some fairly weak Christian claims to find the idea of trinity in the Old Testament. If we look at the Old Testament through a Christian lens, we certainly find evidence of God the Son and of the Holy Spirit in the Hebrew scripture. However, to be honest, this evidence does not rise to a level that it will be particularly convincing to those who look only at the Old Testament through a traditional Jewish lens. If we are to conclusively demonstrate the deity of Christ and the separate personhood of the Holy Spirit to a skeptic, we ought to stick primarily to the New Testament.

Singer goes to great lengths to convince his hearers that Jesus is not God-in-the-flesh, and he used a number of tactics in an attempt to do so. First of all, he demonstrates quite effectively that the Old Testament is very strongly monotheistic. He has plenty of scriptural grounds for this. Of course, he uses Deuteronomy 6:4, the most famous biblical declaration of monotheism. “Hear O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” He quotes dozens of other passages which unambiguously demonstrate that the God of the Old Testament is one God. To this the Christian says Amen! Therefore, he concludes, any Christian claim that there are three persons in the godhead is proven false. What he fails to notice is that there are also dozens of strong statements of monotheism in the New Testament! (Mark 12:29, John 5:44, John 17:3, Romans 3:30, 1 Cor 8:4-6, Gal 3:20, Eph 4:4-6, James 2:19, 1 Tim 1:17, 2:5 and more) Some of the strongest statements of monotheism in the entire Scripture are found in the Gospel of John, which is the book which also most forcefully lays out the deity of Christ. Apparently, John, who knew Jesus intimately, was perfectly comfortable with the idea of monotheism, while also believing that Jesus is God (John 1:1, 8:58-59, 10:30-33).

Singer’s arguments against the deity of Christ are many. It will be difficult to discuss all of them here. But in the end, they come down to this: Singer claims that the New Testament authors are false witnesses, and that Jesus neither claimed to be the Messiah, not did he claim to be God. For example, his response to C S Lewis’ classic Liar, Lord or Lunatic argument is this: “Jesus never claimed to be the messiah, but rather this was a claim placed in his mouth by others.” Singer makes similar kinds of arguments about the deity of Christ. He implies (falsely!) that only the gospel of John has Jesus claiming to be God, and he goes even further to claim that it was only in the fourth century that the church as a whole even came to the conclusion that Jesus is indeed “one substance with the Father.”

There is a lot to unpack here, but let me deal with the most important anti-Christian attack. In essence, Singer calls the writers of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts liars! He tells us that they invented a version of Jesus which Jesus himself never claimed of himself. Rabbi Singer claims that they manipulated their now-dead leader by putting words in his mouth that he would have instantly repudiated if he were still alive. Is this a credible claim? Let the readers decide for themselves, but I believe that this charge is not only false and libelous. It is absurd. If this were true, then the authors of the gospels would have had to participate in a conspiracy of truly monumental proportions. Mark was written, most likely in the 50s AD, or possibly in the very early 60s. Matthew and Luke were also written by the mid-60s, and John was written either in the second half of the 70s or early 80s AD.[[3]](#footnote-3) When Mark was written, most of the apostles were still alive, as were tens of thousands of eye-witnesses to the words and the life-events of Jesus of Nazareth. Singer proposes that Mark gave utterly false testimony about Jesus when these folks were still around to correct his falsehoods. Apparently, the other witnesses to the ministry of Jesus were in on this deceitful conspiracy as well, as none rose to repudiate Mark’s lies. Not only that, but the historical evidence is that most of the apostles were martyred for their faith, as were hundreds of others of the early disciples, yet none of them ever owned up to the fact of this massive conspiracy to create a Jesus who did not even exist. All of these people died for a claimed belief that they knew was a lie. Is this scenario credible?

Everything we know about John, Paul, Peter, Luke, James and the other witnesses, all of whom agree that Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, and all of whom agreed that he was God-in-the-flesh, tells us that these people were not deceitful conspiracists. They all believed in and preached the resurrection of Christ, as well as promoting Jesus' public claim to being the Messiah. All of them were willing to die rather than repudiate these core Christian beliefs.

Singer claims that Paul did not believe in the deity of Christ. This is one of his weakest arguments, although he is not the only skeptic to make such a claim. Paul talked about “our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). Paul tells us that in Christ the fullness of Deity lives in bodily form (Colossians 2:9). The idea that Paul somehow disagreed with the apostles and other church leaders in Jerusalem on the deity of Christ is not supported by Scripture.

Not surprisingly, Singer claims that it was only Constantine, in AD 325, who finally established the deity of Christ at the Council of Nicaea. John 1:1, which had already been around for well over two centuries, tells a different story. Singer also tell us, accurately, that the word trinity was not used by the church before Tertullian coined the word at the end of the second century. This is true. Trinity is not a biblical word. But this fact is not relevant to Singer’s overall thesis. The question is not whether the biblical writers used the word trinity. They did not. The question is whether Jesus claimed to be the Messiah and the Son of God. Let us not be confused by Singer’s smoke screen about the historical use of vocabulary.

Here is the bottom line for me, personally. Jesus is not who Singer says he is. He was no mere mortal who was later manipulated by deceitful followers into a false Messiah. Jesus fulfilled all legitimate messianic prophecies and expectations, and he did so knowingly. As is stated in Matthew 5:17, Jesus fulfilled the messianic expectations of the Law and the Prophets. Not only that, but Jesus was the greatest miracle-worker in history. History tells us that tens of thousands came to witness the miracle-working ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Most germane of all, Jesus was raised from the dead.

Naturally, Singer addresses the question of the resurrection. One would think that he might refute the biblical claim of the empty tomb. Or we might expect him to deny that Jesus was in fact executed by crucifixion, or to deny that the resurrection was preached in Jerusalem in the immediate aftermath of his death-proclaimed by the eye-witnesses to the resurrection. No, Singer does not do this. His rather weak counter-argument to the facts of the crucifixion—the empty tomb, the hundreds of eye-witnesses, and the fact of the public declaration of the resurrection of Christ—is to claim that the resurrection accounts in the four gospels have contradictory information. Of course, Singer is not the first to claim that the separate eye-witness and second-hand accounts are hopelessly contradictory.

Two things about this. First, these claims of contradiction are easily shown to be untrue. Second, even if one of the witnesses got one rather small detail of the post-resurrection events wrong (they did not), how does this refute the arguments for the resurrection of Jesus, which involve the universally-recognized fact of the empty tomb, and the public declaration by eye-witnesses in Jerusalem? I have published a full harmonization of the four gospel post-resurrection accounts which was originally produced by Wilbur N. Pickering. It is available at <https://evidenceforchristianity.org/2715/> The claims of inexplainable contradiction are simply not correct. Notice this, however, about Singer’s treatment of the resurrection. He does nothing to undermine the central evidence for the resurrection of Christ. He does not deny that Jesus was executed on a cross, that he was buried, that his tomb was empty on the third day, and that the resurrection was preached publicly in Jerusalem, before many thousands who could have refuted the claim. Surely the disciples did not steal the body, and surely Jesus was dead. The resurrection of Christ says a lot about Singer’s claim that Jesus was a mere human being who made no pretentions to being the Messiah.

There are quite a number of other polemic arguments that Singer makes against the Christian idea about salvation and about our Savior, Jesus of Nazareth. Time and space does not allow me to address all of these attempts to disprove the foundational claims of Christians. Suffice it to say that they are of the same sort already covered. They are a mixture of accurate claims which do not logically lead to Singer’s thesis, relatively weak claims of errors or contradiction in the New Testament, and unfair attacks on the integrity of the authors of the New Testament.

**Testimonies of Antisemitism**

This brings me to the last category of material in Singer’s two-volume anti-Christian work. A large portion of Let’s Get Biblical is devoted to harrowing accounts of antisemitism. Singer laces throughout the two volumes evidence of antisemitic thought and action by Christians throughout the past twenty centuries. He exposes Martin Luther’s embarrassing and inexcusable anti-Jewish sentiment. He shows convincingly that church fathers as early as the third century were making inexcusable and unchristian attacks on Jews—pinning on them the blame for the death of Jesus. This is not correct, because the Bible tells us that the Father was fully in control of the events surrounding the crucifixion, and that all of us, whether we were there that day or not and whether we are Jewish or not, are equally to blame for the death of Jesus.

One gets the sense of deep resentment and bitterness on the part of Rabbi Singer. He is clearly not prepared to forgive Christians for their inexcusable behavior. His bitterness toward Christians as a group leaks out in the book. In Vol 2, p. 209 he accuses Christians in general of “venomous hate for the Chosen People.” It is hard to defend his provocative words. However, who are we, as Christians, to criticize Singer on this point? Who are we as Christians generally to criticize Jews who have unresolved bitterness and even hatred toward us for actions that we professed Christians have committed, even if we are not directly responsible for them? Let us follow the example of Nehemiah in Nehemiah 1:5-7 and of Daniel in Daniel 9:4-6. Rather than claiming that a true Christian would never exhibit antisemitism, let us take group responsibility for those who have taken the name of Christ, but have behaved in reprehensible ways toward the Jewish people. Let us admit it. “We” have sinned against the Jewish people again and again for nearly two thousand years. Let us show compassion to Jews like Rabbi Singer, rather than call them out for what might seem to be unfair generalizations.

Post Script:

There is one criticism that Singer makes about Christian apologists which I want to address, although it did not fit well into my defense above. It is a common claim by Christians that in the first few centuries after Christ, Rabbis removed messianic prophecies from their weekly readings of the Torah in the Synagogue. These Synagogue readings are known to Jews as the *Haftorah*. Specifically, Christians (including myself) have claimed that Jewish readers purposefully removed parts of Isaiah 53 from their Synagogue readings because it was causing Jews to turn to Christianity. Singer (Vol. 2, p. 108) challenges Christians to prove this contention. It is true that Jews do not read Isaiah 53 in their regular Synagogue worship, but it is apparently not true that this passage was removed by Rabbis to prevent Jews from converting to Christianity. I have resolved to stop making this sort of claim. Apologists have a couple of quotes from Jewish writers out there, and they repeatedly go back to these quotes, but Singer ably refutes these sources. I am prepared to agree with the Christian apologetic argument that the Jews have changed their public readings to remove messianic passages which point Jews toward Jesus of Nazareth, but only if I am shown strong evidence. I will need to be presented with irrefutable evidence to that end before I am willing to make this claim. We ought to observe the Golden Rule in our apologetics, which implies that we should only use arguments that will stand the light of criticism from those on the other side of and discussion with those who oppose our Christian belief.

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1. This is not unique to the servant passages in Isaiah—that God will use a metaphor in two different ways in the same passage. Another example is in Ezekiel 34. In Ezekiel 34:1-6 the shepherds of Israel are its elders, but in Ezekiel 34:7-10 he tells them that he has rejected the elders of Judah. In Ezekiel 34:11-16 he tells them that Messiah will now be the shepherd of his people. In Ezekiel 34 God’s shepherds are from Israel, then God tells them they are rejected, and replaced by Messiah. In Isaiah 49 God’s servant is Israel, then God tells them they are rejected as his servant, and are replaced by Messiah. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bear in mind, however, that if, as I claim, Singer’s counter-arguments to the fulfillment of prophecy by Jesus are indeed false, then Jesus is indeed the Messiah and the Christian presupposition is certainly true! Let us remember that in this battle over presuppositions, ours—the Christian presupposition—is the correct one! [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Liberal scholars propose somewhat later dates, especially for John. I have looked at the data very carefully from all angles for many years and what I am stating here is my personal conclusion. In my material on all four gospels at my website www.evidenceforchristianity.org, I go into details on this. Readers can decide for themselves, but this is my carefully considered conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)