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Article

The Reception of the Hebrew Prophets in Ancient Christianity

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Abstract: This contribution discusses the ways in which the Hebrew prophets in Greek and Latin translations were received by Christians from the second to fifth centuries CE, preceded by an impression of the New Testament use of these prophets. Besides the vast amount of ecclesiastical references and commentaries, it also deals with Marcionite and Gnostic views. It demonstrates that Christians most often read the prophets as testimonies to Christ and the communities of those who believed in him. Allegorical readings came up soon and were justified by Origen of Alexandria (185–254 CE), whose interpretations were most influential in subsequent centuries. In the fourth century, a reaction against the allegorical reading of the prophets arose in Antioch, Syria; the “Antiochene school” rather limited its approach to the historical context of the prophets, except for texts read Christologically in the New Testament. This article also considers the question whether the Christian appropriation of the Hebrew prophets may be deemed legitimate.

Keywords: Hebrew prophets; Patristic interpretation; Gnosticism; Marcion; Alexandrian school; Antiochian school; allegorical interpretation; Christian appropriation of the Old Testament



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1. Introduction

From the beginning of the Christian movement, the books of Hebrew prophets were read as testimonies to Jesus’ birth, life, teaching, acts, passion, resurrection and exaltation to heaven, and as prophecies concerning the communities of those who believed in him. The earliest Christian writings—most of them collected in the New Testament—demonstrate that these prophets were quoted as predictions, proof texts and clarifications of the events that would happen to Jesus and the subsequent “church”. This paper surveys the ways these prophetic books were received by Christians of the first five centuries of our era. It also discusses the question of the legitimacy of the Christian appropriation of the Hebrew prophets.

2. Which Prophets Do We Mean?

First it should be clarified who are the prophets whose ancient Christian reception will be discussed here. In contemporary rabbinic Judaism, there was a clear view of the collection of prophetic books, since according to “our rabbis”, it comprised the following: Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve (called “Minor Prophets” in Western Christianity).¹ This rabbinic list is confirmed by the Christian monk and scholar Jerome (331 or 347–420 CE)², although according to his information, some rabbis attached the book of Ruth to Judges and Lamentations to Jeremiah.³ In medieval rabbinic Judaism, the prophets were divided into the “former prophets”, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, and the subsequent “latter prophets” (Lightstone 2002, p. 171). In ancient Christianity, however, there were other views of the number of Hebrew prophets. For instance, Melito of Sardes (2nd half 2nd c.) listed six prophetic books: Isaiah, Jeremiah, the Twelve, Daniel, Ezekiel and Ezra.⁴ From North-Africa, we have an anonymous, fourth-century list of Old Testament prophets from Adam and Noah to Ezra.⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 313–386) counted five prophetic books, viz. the Twelve, Isaiah, Jeremiah (including Baruch, Lamentations and Jeremiah’s Epistle), Ezekiel and Daniel.⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus

(ca. 326–390) also counted five prophetic books, viz. the Twelve, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, but he did not mention Baruch, Lamentations and the Epistle.⁷ The inclusion of Daniel among the prophets agrees with the Gospel of Matthew 24:15 and with Hippolytus of Rome's commentary on the Greek version of Daniel, dating to 202–204. Hippolytus' commentary also comprises the chapter about Susanna, which is not found in the Hebrew and Aramaic texts. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) regarded Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel and the Twelve as prophetic books, and furthermore, the Psalms of David, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach.⁸ Reading the Psalms as prophecies of Christ was widespread in ancient Christianity and is in line with the numerous New Testament quotations from the Psalms with regard to Christ. The book of Acts 2:29–30 explicitly calls David a prophet.⁹

There was another prophetic collection that, however, never made it into the rabbinic canon of Scripture, but was appreciated by some Christians of the first centuries, viz. the books of (1, or Ethiopic) Enoch, the different parts of which date to the third to first centuries BCE. This work, originally written in Aramaic, is quoted as an authoritative book in the New Testament epistle of Jude 14–15 and referred to as Scripture by Tertullian of Carthage (ca. 160–220).¹⁰ It has been argued that 1 Enoch was very influential in early Christianity (Barker 1988; Reed 2005), but it had no chance of being included in the Christian canon of Scripture, with the exception of the canon of the Ethiopic church. Therefore, in the end, references to it are scarce. Augustine, for instance, considered this book apocryphal.¹¹

In the limited space of this paper, it is not possible to discuss all books that ancient Christian authors read as prophetic testimonies, although in a New Testament and ancient Christian perspective, it is artificial to exclude the Psalms from this survey! However, having indicated the variety of early Christian views, and since I cannot expound everything in this context, I will limit my attention to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve and Daniel, with a special focus on Isaiah, because he had the pride of place among the prophets, and Micah, because I have previously investigated the reception of this “minor prophet” (Roukema 2019).

3. Reception of the Prophets in the New Testament

The Christian reception of the Hebrew prophets is first attested in the Greek New Testament, but it started before these writings were produced with the very beginning of the Jesus movement that developed into the variegated early church.¹² After Saul of Tarsus had come to believe in the risen Christ, he was taught that Christ died for our sins, was buried and raised in accordance with the Scriptures (1 Cor 15:3–4). Undoubtedly among these Scriptures there were many passages from the prophets, as the New Testament testifies.¹³ We may assume that Jesus himself also applied prophetic texts to his own life, teaching, death and resurrection. Yet we cannot be sure about the details of his references to the prophets, since we only know the testimonies of the evangelists, written decades later, so that some of these quotations may have been inspired by early Christian readings. However this may be, the evangelists, especially Matthew, often cited prophetic texts that they considered to be fulfilled in Jesus' life and ministry.¹⁴

Likewise, many of Paul's epistles contain quotations from the prophets. For instance, in Rom 9–11, his discussion of the tense relationship between Jews and gentiles who believed in Jesus Christ and Jews who did not, he often referred to Isaiah, and moreover, to Hosea, Joel and Malachi—as well as to other Old Testament books, for that matter.¹⁵ In the ensuing chapters on the relationship between Jewish and gentile Christians in Rome, Paul quoted Isaiah again.¹⁶ In 1 Corinthians, he based his arguments on the prophets (mainly Isaiah, also Jeremiah and Hosea) to a lesser extent.¹⁷ The first epistle of Peter also contains references and allusions to Isaiah.¹⁸ The epistle to the Hebrews quotes Isaiah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk and Haggai.¹⁹ According to the book of Acts (2:17–21), Peter cited Joel 3:1–5 as a prophecy of the descent of the Holy Spirit to explain what had happened on that day

of Pentecost. In this book, various other prophetic passages are quoted as testimonies to Christ and to the different responses he would evoke after his death and resurrection.²⁰

For their quotations, the New Testament authors used either the Greek translation called the Septuagint, or revisions of it, some unknown, or perhaps their own versions. As for the prophets, the original Hebrew text does not come up.²¹ Since most of these authors were Jews, it was obvious for them to read their own sacred, prophetic books as predictions of Jesus Christ, the faith in him, and the inclusion of gentile believers in Jewish Christian communities. In their view, the prophets fully justified their persuasions. Formally speaking, other Jews did the same, like the (most probably Essene) community whose writings have been found near Qumran adjacent to the Dead Sea. They produced a commentary on Habakkuk, whose text they applied to “the Teacher of Righteousness”, who knew all the mysteries of the prophets; to his opponent “the Wicked Priest”; and to the Kittim or Romans of their own time and the near future.²² We find the same procedure in commentaries on Isaiah, Hosea, Micah, Nahum and Zephaniah discovered in Qumran.²³ It is important, therefore, to establish that in the initial, Jewish stage of the Christian movement, the method of reading the prophets in relation to Jesus Christ was not unusual as such, but basically legitimate, even though non-Christian Jews rejected these interpretations.²⁴ However, this was an intra-Jewish debate.

4. Reception of the Prophets in Subsequent Christian Writings (ca. 96–200)

In Christian works, also written in Greek, from the end of the first to the end of the second centuries, we see the same kind of references to the Hebrew prophets as in the New Testament. Clement of Rome’s epistle to the church in Corinth, from ca. 96, contains a full quotation of Isa 53:1–12, the chapter on the suffering servant of the Lord, applied to Christ who came with humility instead of arrogance.²⁵

The unknown gentile author of the epistle attributed to Barnabas (from ca. 132) argued with reference to the prophets (including the Psalms) that God does not need the Mosaic sacrifices, but asks for repentance and righteousness.²⁶ The author intended to demonstrate to Jews who did not believe in Jesus that they misunderstood their own prophets (and other scriptures), and to Christians that these prophets corroborated their faith.

The Christian philosopher and apologist Justin Martyr (of Samaria) wrote an extensive *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho* (ca. 160) in which he and his Jewish interlocutors discuss numerous passages from the prophets. In part, Justin’s quotations correspond with prophetic texts that are used in the New Testament writings (in his day the New Testament as a canonical collection did not yet exist), but he cast his net much wider with the same intention as pseudo-Barnabas. Thus, he applied Mic 4:1–7, a passage about the gentiles coming to Jerusalem to hear God’s law and word and about the ensuing peace, to the gentile Christians who came to Christ and learned from him to be peaceful (Justin Martyr 2003; Roukema 2019, p. 104).²⁷

Such references to the Hebrew prophets in relation to Christ are also found in Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in Gaul during roughly the last two decades of the second century. In his works, *Refutation and Overthrow of the Falsely Called Knowledge*—mostly known as *Against the Heresies*—and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, he often quoted passages from the prophets in relation to Christ and his teaching. For his birth from the Virgin Mary, he referred to Isa 7:14 (Septuagint) in accordance with Matt 1:23 and Justin, rejecting the Jewish-Christian understanding that Isaiah actually spoke of a young woman. For this topic, he also quoted Isa 66:7, “Before she who was in labour gave birth . . . she escaped and gave birth to a boy.” In Irenaeus’ view, this prophecy indicated that the Virgin birth was unexpected.²⁸

From this period, there are far more testimonies to the Christian, “spiritual” reading of the Hebrew prophets (Carleton Paget 2013, pp. 567–72). We may observe that from Paul to Justin, the use of the Old Testament prophets as proof texts for the Christian faith and morality and in opposition to the non-Christian Jewish understanding was firmly

established.²⁹ At the same time, an important shift took place; for initially, those who, like Paul, believed in Jesus Christ and drew on the Hebrew prophets, were Jews themselves. But soon there were authors who, like pseudo-Barnabas and Justin, studied the Hebrew prophets—though in Greek translations—as predictions of their Christian beliefs, had a gentile background. When they argued that Jews who rejected Jesus misunderstood their own sacred books, they did so from a different position. This was no longer an intra-Jewish debate, but a controversy between gentile Christians, who had appropriated the Hebrew prophets, and Jews, who were not convinced by the Christian readings.

5. Gnostic and Marcionite Reception of the Prophets

Contemporaneously with Justin and Irenaeus, another totally different gentile view of the Hebrew prophets had come up. There were not only Christians who read these prophets in order to find in them ancient predictions of the Savior in whom they had come to believe, but also those who were embarrassed and shocked by the occasionally rough image of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. They concluded that the Old Testament God was an inferior, or even malicious, deity who could not be identified with the transcendent Father proclaimed by Christ. Elaborate myths were invented in order to clarify how the lower, or malicious, God and his angels had originated, and in which relationship they stood to the good and gracious God, the Father of Christ. Scholars have often called these persuasions “Gnostic” because some of its adherents used this term, which refers to a special *gnosis*, i.e., “knowledge”, but we have to be aware that many of the so-called “Gnostics” most probably designated themselves by other terms (Williams 1996, pp. 7–53; Roukema 1998, pp. 120–24). Furthermore, Marcion of Pontus also ascribed the Old Testament to a lower God, the Creator who was righteous but not good, yet unlike the Gnostics, he did not base his theology on complicated and speculative myths (Räsänen 2005, pp. 105–7). According to detailed testimonies by his opponents, Marcion edited an abridged version of the Gospel of Luke and the Pauline epistles in which he reduced the number of Old Testament references (BeDuhn 2013, pp. 74–77, 208–13).

A text often quoted in Gnostic works as proof of the Creator’s arrogance and ignorance is, “I am God and there is no other God beside me” (Isa 45:5; Meyer 2007, pp. 116, 191, 196, 206, 209, 212, 479, 484, 729). “Heretical” proof texts for the malign character of the Old Testament God were, “I am God, who makes peace and creates evils” (Isa 45:7), “Will there be evil in a town which the Lord has not done?” (Amos 3:6) and “evil things came down from the Lord to the gates of Jerusalem” (Mic 1:12b). According to the Christian scholar Origen of Alexandria (185–254), the “heretics” used these texts to demonstrate the imperfection of the Creator, whereas Christ proclaimed the more perfect God.³⁰ Such quotations demonstrate that these “heretics” despised the inferior, arrogant Creator who brought about evil. Instead, they put their trust in Christ’s presumed high Father.

Irenaeus preserved another testimony to a Gnostic view of the Hebrew prophets. He relates a complicated myth of a Gnostic group that revered the serpent of Paradise because it had revealed the true knowledge to Adam and Eve (Gen 3). According to this group, the Hebrew prophets belonged to the Creator Yaldabaoth and his six rulers in the following partition: To Yaldabaoth himself belonged Moses, Joshua, Amos and Habakkuk; to Yao belonged Samuel, Nathan, Jonah and Micah; to Sabaoth belonged Elijah, Joel and Zechariah; to Adonai belonged Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Daniel; to Eloï belonged Tobit and Haggai; to Horeus belonged Micah (perhaps Malachi or Micah the son of Imlah is meant here) and Nahum; to Astaphaeus belonged Ezra and Zephaniah. In addition, these Gnostics held that nevertheless Sophia, who had emanated from the highest God, inspired these prophets to speak about Christ and other supracelestial beings, so that some of their words still revealed salvation.³¹ This means that this group did not reject all prophecies but distinguished between passages inspired by the Creator and his rulers and isolated words prompted by Sophia. In fact, this attribution of harsh, difficult texts to the Creator and his companions, and comforting passages to the good God, was an early, religious kind of source criticism.

We may wonder how well-known and influential such views of the Hebrew prophets were in ancient Christianity. It is telling that Irenaeus found such persuasions in the Rhône valley in Gaul, far from the center of the Roman empire, and that many original Gnostic writings in Coptic translations were unearthed in Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, at another corner of the empire. In between, such ideas were known as well, given the attestations to Gnostic and Marcionite assemblies (B. Layton 1987, pp. 119, 178–79, 212, 292, 295–96, 389; Räisänen 2005, pp. 100–1, 119–20; Thomassen 2006, pp. 47, 73, 78, 168, 174, 478; Pearson 2007). In any case, all around the Roman empire, ecclesiastical authors from the 2nd to 4th centuries were aware of such views of the Old Testament and its God since many of them distanced themselves from these beliefs. This implies that the ecclesiastical readings of the Hebrew prophets should be conceived against the foil of the Gnostic and Marcionite views which, theoretically, might also have developed into the dominant “Christian” reception of these prophets.

6. Third-Century Christian Commentaries on the Prophets

In the third century, mainstream Christian, “ecclesiastical” authors did not only refer to the Hebrew prophets as ancient witnesses to Christian beliefs in opposition to Jews and “heretics”, but a few of them also published commentaries on distinct sections or even complete prophetic books. Many of these third-century commentaries were lost or preserved only fragmentarily, but some of them survived.

In 393, Jerome lists twelve Old Testament sections and books on which a certain Hippolytus had written commentaries, among which Isaiah, Daniel and Zechariah fall into the category of prophets used in this article.³² Traditionally, this author is identified as Hippolytus of Rome who flourished in the first decades of the third century, although other theories about his identity have been proposed as well. A large part of Hippolytus’ *Commentary on Daniel* was preserved in Greek, its original language, and for other parts, a Slavonic translation is available (Hippolytus 2017). He used Theodotion’s translation of Daniel, which was more popular than the Septuagint version of this book. This work (from 202–204) is the earliest extant commentary on an Old Testament prophet. He wrote this commentary during the persecution of Christians under emperor Septimius Severus, which prompted many Christians to believe that Christ’s second coming was imminent. Among other texts, they based their expectation on the vision of four terrifying beasts in Dan 7. Hippolytus explained that its full accomplishment should not be expected soon and exhorts his readers to be patient. He interpreted Dan 7:13–14, which his audience considered a prophecy of Christ’s second coming, as pertaining to Christ’s eternal authority given to him by his Father.³³ Because of the current persecution, he highlighted Daniel’s references to martyrdom. In general, Hippolytus gave both historical and Christological interpretations of the stories and visions in this book.

The next author who investigated the Hebrew prophets is Origen of Alexandria, who settled in Caesarea Maritima in ca. 234. As a basis for his interpretations of the Old Testament, including the prophets, he produced a text-critical edition of it in six parallel columns in 25 books, called *Hexapla* (“sixfold”). It consisted of the Hebrew text, a transliteration in Greek characters, and the Greek translations of Aquila (from ca. 140), Symmachus (ca. 170), the Septuagint (3rd–1st c. BCE) and Theodotion (2nd c.). Occasionally, Origen added other versions as well. These volumes were a wonderful tool for himself and later expositors, who used only the Greek translations. It survives in fragments and later quotations (Trebolle Barrera 1998, pp. 313–17; Martens 2012, pp. 42–49).

According to Jerome, Origen wrote commentaries on Isaiah, Ezekiel and most of the Twelve, as well as homilies on Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.³⁴ In addition, Origen produced short notes on difficult passages. Most of these works are lost, but parts of them were preserved, fragmentarily or almost fully, in Greek or in Latin translations. In his extant Biblical commentaries, Origen meticulously investigated the works philologically with respect to textual criticism and historical and literary analysis, in accordance with contemporary Greek scholarship (Neuschäfer 1988; Martens 2012, pp. 41–63). Undoubtedly,

he also applied this method to his now lost commentaries on the prophets. Indispensable to him was the spiritual sense of the prophetic works, to which he paid ample attention. In a Greek homiletic fragment on Ezek 1:1, he argued that Ezekiel was a “type” of Christ, since both were 30 when the heavens were opened to them (cf. Luke 3:21, 23), Ezekiel was in exile in Babylon as Christ was in exile in this world, Ezekiel’s name means “God’s power” (which also applies to Christ), and both were called “son of man” (e.g., Ezek 2:1 and Matt 8:20).³⁵ Origen’s *Commentary on Micah* is lost, but his reading of some texts is found in other preserved works. He interpreted the descent of the Lord from heaven to the earth (Mic 1:3–4) as the descent of Christ—yet not to be taken spatially, he notes—for, being equal to God, he emptied himself and became like a slave (Phil 2:6–7; Roukema 2019, p. 47). Likewise, in the enigmatic words, “And it will be from the drop of this people, when Jacob is being gathered, and he will be gathered together with all” (Mic 2:11–12, Septuagint), he read the drop as an allusion to Christ’s descent to the earth and incarnation, and interpreted the subsequent words as a prophecy of the gathering of the Jewish Christians and of all the nations (Roukema 2019, pp. 81, 85). This allegorical interpretation of “the drop” is typical of Origen. Concerning the vision in Isa 2:2–4 (paralleled by Mic 4:1–3; cf. Section 4), he observed that all believers knew it. Its well-known status must be due to the place this passage had received in the liturgical readings (Roukema 2019, pp. 102, 231–32).

7. Fourth- and Early Fifth-Century Commentaries and the Antiochene Reaction

Origen’s extraordinary exegetical and homiletical achievements had a tremendous influence on later expositors of the prophetic books. The first to be mentioned is Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 262–339), who wrote several works in Greek about the Hebrew prophets. Some of them are lost or were preserved fragmentarily, but half of his work *The Proof of the Gospel*, from ca. 318, has survived. In it, he collected a huge number of prophecies that he considered fulfilled in Christ, the church, and even in the Roman supremacy and peace (Mic 4:3–4; Eusebius of Caesarea [1920] 2000; Roukema 2019, p. 108). The last point reflects the relief of the Christians after the persecutions by the authorities ended and emperor Constantine sided with the “orthodox” church. Heart-breaking is his report of the desolate state of Jerusalem in his day, as announced—in his view—in Mic 3:12. Its fate, according to Eusebius, was due to its rejection and harsh treatment of Christ (Roukema 2019, p. 100). He argued that Christianity took the place that the Jews had in the past; in his view, the Christians continued the religion of the Hebrews living before the Mosaic law.³⁶ Eusebius composed a *Commentary on Isaiah* in which he first paid attention to the various Greek versions and expounded the prophet’s historical context, but as a matter of course, he also highlighted the prophecies fulfilled in Christ. He was inspired by Origen’s *Commentary on Isaiah*, although he did not follow all of the latter’s allegorical interpretations. Without hesitation, however, he explained some terms allegorically in Origen’s wake. In Isaiah’s Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1–7), he interpreted the “vine sore” (thus Isa 5:2 in the Septuagint) as “the Word of God”, “the true vine” (John 15:1), i.e., Christ (Eusebius of Caesarea 2013; Roukema 2005, pp. 283–84). Hollerich notes: “Hills and high mountains often stand for haughty souls uplifted against God. Cedars, cypresses, and oaks are metaphors for foreign kings. Deserts represent nations who did not know God, especially when Eusebius is expounding the calling of the Gentiles. Forest is given the same interpretation. Animals are invariably allegorized, especially to serve the interpretation that Isaiah is prophesying that the preaching of the Gospel brings men from a beastly to a civilized way of life” (Hollerich 1999, p. 92).

Contemporaneously with Eusebius, a critical approach to the allegorical, spiritualizing exegesis of the Old Testament arose as well. This movement was initiated by Eustathius of Antioch in Syria, but as far as we know, he did not write commentaries on the Hebrew prophets or treatises in which he discussed the interpretation of prophetic texts. Another fourth-century author who opposed the Origenian reading of the Old Testament and wished to interpret rather its literal and historical meaning, was Diodore of Tarsus († ca. 390), a native of Antioch. According to the tenth-century lexicon *Suidas*, Diodore

wrote commentaries on the Old Testament prophets, but if this information is trustworthy, these expositions have perished (Bekker 1854, p. 297). Diodore's pupil, Theodore of Mopsuestia (ca. 350–428), was born at Antioch like his master, stood in the same tradition of a sober, historical reading of the Old Testament, with few references to Christ and occasional moral lessons for Christians. According to the Syrian author Ebedjesu (+ 1312), he wrote commentaries on Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve and Daniel (Assemanus 1725, pp. 31–32), but only his *Commentary on the Twelve* (from 370–380) has survived. Theodore vehemently denied the common Christianizing interpretation of Micah's vision of the gentiles coming to Jerusalem (Mic 4:1–3). However, he gave a rare homiletical application in his comment on Mic 4:5, saying that *we* all alike (i.e., Christians included) have to live according to God's will. Theodore held that Israel's new ruler to be born in Bethlehem according to Mic 5:1–2 was Zerubbabel, a descendant of David, who reigned over the Israelites after their return from exile in Babel. Yet, he admitted as well that the true fulfilment of this prophecy was achieved in Christ, undoubtedly because of its quotation in Matt 2:6, to which, however, he did not refer (Roukema 2019, pp. 102, 114, 129–30). John Chrysostom (ca. 349–407), who also originated from Antioch and served there as a deacon and a priest, distanced himself from Origen's allegorical exegesis as well, although he admitted that sometimes it was adequate. In his *Commentary on Isaiah* 1:1–8:10, he gave an "allegorical interpretation" of the Song of the Vineyard (Isa 5:1–7) which is, of course, a parable that needs to be decoded. Usually, John Chrysostom focused on the prophet's historical context, but he also applied the prophet's reprimands of Judah and Jerusalem to contemporaneous Jews and Christians. As a matter of course, in line with the Gospel of Matthew (1:23), he explained the prophecy of the birth of a boy (Isa 7:14) as being fulfilled in Jesus (Chrysostom 1983, n.d.).³⁷

These authors focused on grammatical and historical interpretation of the Old Testament. They were opposed to allegorical interpretation and reticent in applying spiritual interpretations with regard to Christ. They read the Old Testament as a testimony to God's education of Israel, from which Christians had to draw their own lessons. Because of their affiliation with Antioch, their movement is traditionally called the "Antiochene school", over against the "Alexandrian school" of Origen and those who followed his allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament. This distinction has been criticized in recent decades (Ondrey 2018, pp. 1–17, 237–39; Martens 2008), and admittedly, it is not an absolute dichotomy, but to my sense it remains adequate. In Sections 8 and 9, I will come back to it.

The distinction between the two "schools" comes to light in a *Commentary on Isaiah* 1–16, attributed to Basil of Caesarea (ca. 329–378), but Basil's authorship is mostly contested. This implies that this work may stem from the decades after Basil.³⁸ Like Eusebius and John Chrysostom, this expositor also paid attention to the historical context of Isaiah's prophecies. He often interpreted the text in relation to Christ and the church which, as such, does not come down to allegorical interpretation, since such observations may follow naturally from a Christian reading of the prophetic text. However, he did not shun allegorizations, as we see in his interpretation of Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard. The Septuagint reads that the vineyard was situated "in/on a horn (ἐν κέρατι), on a fertile place" (Isa 5:1). According to this author, the horn referred to the cross on which Christ was hung. He did not interpret the "vine *sorec*" (Isa 5:2) as Christ, as Eusebius did, but as God's chosen people, the descendants of the patriarchs. This was based on Symmachus' translation of *sorec*, viz. "elect" (Roukema 2005, p. 283). Yet in Isa 6:6, in the chapter of the prophet's vocation, pseudo-Basil observed that the live coal that a seraph took to touch Isaiah's mouth referred to Christ's incarnation. Such allegorizations—which might stem from Origen—would be unacceptable to an Antiochene expositor.

A most prominent commentator of the Old Testament was Jerome, mentioned already in Sections 2 and 6. His native language was Latin, but he was fluent in Greek as well. In order to better interpret the Old Testament, he learned Hebrew, for which he benefited from Jews, some of whom had converted to Christianity. One of his achievements was the translation of the Old Testament—and thus the Hebrew prophets—from Hebrew (and some

Aramaic) into Latin. Previous “Old Latin” (*Vetus Latina*) versions had been made from the Greek Septuagint, which often diverged from the Hebrew text. It must be said, however, that the extremely literal Greek translation made by the Jewish Christian Aquila, and the more literary version by Symmachus, were a great help to Jerome where the Hebrew text was incomprehensible to him and his advisors. Moreover, he profited from Theodotion’s translation (Bogaert 2013, p. 516; Kamesar 2013, pp. 655–57).

In addition, between 393 and 416, Jerome composed voluminous commentaries on the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah 1–32, Ezekiel, the Twelve and Daniel. In his expositions, he regularly referred to Hebrew terms and to the various Greek translations, and he paid ample attention to the literal meaning and the historical context of the prophecies. After these expositions, he usually investigated the spiritual relevance of the text for Christians. To different extents, he then borrowed his allegorical interpretations from Origen. We may even conclude that a considerable part of Origen’s lost commentaries on the prophets have survived in Jerome’s works, which is corroborated by agreements with similar interpretations in other works by Origen himself, and by later authors like Eusebius, who also drew on the Alexandrian.³⁹ However, Jerome’s commentaries on the prophets are not characterized by allegorical interpretations all alike. For his *Commentary on the Twelve*, he often simply took over the spiritual interpretations that he found in Origen, basing himself on the Septuagint version (Roukema 2019, pp. 11–12, 228). Thus, in his *Commentaries on Amos, Micah and Zechariah* (from 393 and 406), he interpreted the “vine sorec” (Isa 5:2) in relation to Christ and the Eucharist. Undoubtedly, he borrowed this interpretation from Origen’s *Commentaries on the Twelve* (Roukema 2005, pp. 283–84; 2019, pp. 53–54). But in his *Commentary on Isaiah*, written subsequently in 408–410 (Jerome 2015), he surprisingly omitted this allegorical interpretation of the vine, although it would have suited it even better than his *Commentary on the Twelve*, and he undoubtedly found it in Origen’s *Commentary on Isaiah*. Neither did he interpret the “horn” in Isa 5:1 (Septuagint) as Christ’s cross, or the live coal (Isa 6:6) as a symbol of Christ’s incarnation, as pseudo-Basil did (which might have been Origenian as well). Apparently, in the time between his *Commentaries on the Twelve* and his *Commentary on Isaiah*, Jerome had changed his mind on such allegorical interpretations. Yet he did not hesitate to read Isaiah in relation to Christ, the Christians and the contemporaneous Jews. The severe prophecies he applied to the Jews. They were punished, in his view, for their enmity towards Christ, due to which Jerusalem and other Judean cities had been devastated by the Romans and the people sent into exile forever (e.g., on Isa 1:6–8, 66:7–9). In Isa 58, however, a chapter on true obedience and fasting by doing justice to the destitute, Jerome read an admonition both of Jews who misunderstood their own religion and of Christians who did not live according to Christ’s teaching.

Although Augustine of Hippo (354–430) did not write commentaries on the Hebrew prophets, I will briefly discuss him here because of his importance to Western Christianity. In Section 2, we saw his wide view of the prophetic books of the Old Testament, but in his twenties, he despised these prophets. At that time, he was a Manichaean (in fact, an auditor, not belonging to the inner circle of the “elect”). Manichaeism, founded by the Persian Mani (216–276/7 CE), may be called a Gnostic religion. Augustine had learned there that the God who had given the law to Moses and had spoken through the Hebrew prophets was not the true God of Jesus but one of the rulers of darkness.⁴⁰ It was only thanks to the spiritual interpretations of the Old Testament by Ambrose (ca. 333–397), bishop of Milan, that Augustine discovered that these books predicted Jesus Christ and were to be read in agreement with his message (Roukema 2019, p. 16). Augustine did not often preach about texts from the Hebrew prophets (*Sermons* 43–50; Augustine of Hippo 1990), but in many of his works, he quoted them as authoritative witnesses for Christians. He often read the prophetic books as moral exhortations and as announcements of what was to come in Christ. In this vein, he briefly discussed all of the prophetic books chronologically from Hosea to Malachi and Ezra in his monumental work *The City of God* 18.26–36 (Augustine of Hippo 1954). In 18.32, his exposition of Habakkuk is relatively

elaborate. In Hab 3:4, he interpreted the words “horns in his hands” (thus the Septuagint and Jerome’s translation) allegorically as “a symbol of Christ’s victorious cross.” Jerome also related this interpretation in his *Commentary on Habakkuk* (Jerome 2016), which implies that it may well be Origenian. This demonstrates that Augustine, too, stood in the Alexandrian exegetical tradition and transmitted it to Western Christianity.

8. Other Fifth-Century Commentaries

After Jerome’s early fifth-century exegetical activities, there are two more commentators on the Hebrew prophets that deserve our attention. In the 420s, Cyril of Alexandria († 444) wrote *Commentaries on Isaiah* and *on the Twelve*, in which he spent much energy on expounding the literal and historical sense of the prophecies. Next, he usually investigated their spiritual sense and relevance for Christians. Cyril is notorious for applying severe passages to Jews from Jesus’ to his own time who did not believe in Jesus. Most probably, he used Origen’s commentaries on the prophets, which explains how his expositions recurrently resemble those of Jerome, who also drew on Origen (Roukema 2019, pp. 228–29), but Cyril’s allegorical interpretations are less prominent.

Next, Theodoret of Cyrus (ca. 393–466), born in Antioch, was an industrious expositor of Scripture. From ca. 430 onward, he wrote commentaries on Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and the Twelve. About the Twelve, he wrote that they are “shrouded in obscurity”, so that people had asked him for his elucidations. This assessment of the Septuagint version of the Twelve is recognizable even today. In his *Commentary*, we see that he often followed Theodore of Mopsuestia, which implies that he sided with the Antiochene school (if one accepts this designation). Theodoret was, however, an independent exegete, for he sometimes criticized Theodore, though without mentioning his name, allowing more Christianizing applications of the prophetic texts. Yet such spiritual interpretations are still rare and succinct in comparison with commentaries of the Alexandrian tradition, like Jerome’s. Theodoret’s comments on Mic 4:3–5 testify to his gratefulness for the increasing power of the Roman empire, due to which profound peace reigned over the whole world (Roukema 2019, pp. 116–17, 228–29). He probably wrote these lines before the invasion of the Huns in 434.⁴¹

9. Evaluation of the Ancient Christian Reception of the Hebrew Prophets

We have to be aware that the Christian reception of the Hebrew prophets in the third to fifth centuries is much broader than the commentaries on their books. The prophets were quoted in homilies, other Old and New Testament commentaries, baptismal instructions, dogmatic treatises, etc., as in the New Testament and in second-century writings. But given the vast amount of literature from the third to fifth centuries, in the context of this article, I can only mention these references in general. For these centuries, I focused on the extant commentaries since they give a fair and accessible impression of the ways in which the Hebrew prophets were received by the Christians of that time.

When the prophets vituperated social injustice, they addressed, of course, the Judeans and Israelites of their own time. Since such prophecies were usually expressed in terms of disobedience towards the Lord, Christian commentators—“Alexandrians”, and to a lesser extent, the “Antiochene” Theodoret as well—often applied such passages to the Jews who rejected Christ. Undeniably, such interpretations give the impression of an anti-Jewish sentiment, which is most regrettable and reproachable. Sometimes such vituperations were interpreted in relation to the church and its leaders, but such applications were less prominent.

If one accepts, despite recent criticism, that the distinction between the Alexandrian and Antiochene “schools” remains adequate and useful—as I do—it still needs to be assessed in its historical context. Initially, Jewish and gentile Christians read the prophets in relation to their faith in Jesus Christ and the corollaries of his ministry. This means that the prophetic and “spiritual” reading of the prophets came first and was not questioned among Christians. In the second century, this method of prophetic and spiritual reading of the Old

Testament prophets was a tool against Gnostic and Marcionite Christians who were critical about the Hebrew God and his servants, like Moses and the prophets. These “heretics” proposed a quite different reading of the prophets, who were seen as spokesmen of a lesser god. If this view had been given the upper hand, it might have changed Christianity tremendously and resulted in a different Christian culture in which the prophetic voices were silenced. In spite of severe weaknesses in the Christian reading of the prophets, especially its anti-Jewish purport, it led to the preservation of the Old Testament, and thus its prophets, for the church as Scripture. The church could not accept the “heretical” view that Jesus had proclaimed another God than the God of the Hebrews. In other words, the church recognized that Jesus could not be separated from his Hebrew, Jewish background. He did proclaim a new message, but not as new as the Gnostics and Marcionites pretended. In the third century as well, the church applied the prophetic and spiritual, allegorical interpretation of the Hebrew prophets as an important instrument in the controversy with these competing communities.

In the fourth century, however, the church—the church that considered itself catholic and orthodox—reached a firm position in the Roman empire. In the catholic and orthodox church—and in other, “schismatic” churches, for that matter—the position of the Old Testament was undisputed. For this reason, the time was ripe for another, less speculative approach that parted with the far-reaching allegorizations. This new approach originated in Antioch in Syria and gave a more sober interpretation that was focused on the literal and historical meaning of the texts. We do not know anything about Diodore’s Christian interpretations of the prophets, but in Theodore’s *Commentary on the Twelve*, we see that he only allowed interpretations with regard to Christ if New Testament authors had preceded him in doing so. In addition, he considered the Hebrew prophets valuable for Christians because they could learn from them how God had led and saved his people in the past as a preparation for salvation by Christ (Ondrey 2018, pp. 75–117, 150–66). Theodoret often agreed with Theodore but was less restrictive in giving explicitly Christianizing interpretations.

The Alexandrian exegetes also paid attention to the literary and historical aspects of the prophets, but at the same time, they not only continued but also developed the spiritual, allegorizing readings of their books that was practiced in the first two centuries. Origen is the most important protagonist of this approach, which was followed by many other authors, of whom Jerome is to be highlighted because he took over many—not all—of Origen’s interpretations in his commentaries, and thus, made them accessible in the Latin-speaking part of the church. In the Greek and Syrian churches, the Antiochene tradition remained stronger, and even Cyril, who definitely stood in the Alexandrian tradition, was more cautious in giving allegorical interpretations of the prophets than Origen and Jerome.

The final question that needs to be discussed is how we should assess the Christian appropriation of the Hebrew prophets. To put it pointedly: was it illegitimate? Admittedly, these books, read and appreciated by the predominantly gentile Christian church, were originally destined for the Hebrew or Jewish people. The church read and appreciated them following the first *Jewish* Christians. In the prophets, mainly Isaiah, it found many promises of God’s salvation that was destined for the gentile nations as well.⁴² The gentile Christians hailed this universalistic message. In other prophetic texts they saw, with the first Jewish Christians, announcements of the coming, passion, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus Christ. Most probably, even Jesus himself understood such texts as predictions of his vocation and destiny. An affirmative answer to the question whether gentile Christians unlawfully annexed the Hebrew prophets presupposes that only Jews could correctly interpret these books. As observed already, however, the gentile Christians appreciated the Hebrew prophets in the wake of Jews who believed in Christ. Undeniably the perspective of gentile Christians was different and hazardous, since they often applied the unfavorable passages of the prophets to the non-Christian Jews, yet without forgetting their relevance to their own communities.

In fact, one might say that (at least) two branches have grown from the variegated Hebrew religion. One is the kind of Judaism that is attested in the vast rabbinic literature.

It disapproves of Jesus and rejects the persuasion that he was the Messiah and Savior. The other is ecclesiastical Christianity, which started as a Jewish sect but gradually outgrew Judaism, especially because of its inclusion of gentile believers and its missionary impetus. It depends on the personal standpoint of each researcher how to assess the ancient Christian use of the Hebrew prophets. I would say that it was legitimate and correct to recognize that faith in Christ was rooted in the Hebrew religion, and thus, in its prophets. However, as pointed out above, a serious flaw in the gentile Christian reading of the prophets is that many authors read the rebukes that the prophets addressed to their compatriots as vituperations of contemporaneous non-Christian Jews. These gentile Christian authors had not sufficiently taken notice of Paul's wish to make his own (Jewish) people jealous of his faith so that they too would believe in Jesus as Christ and Savior (Rom 11:13–14). During the first five centuries, there were Jews who became Christians, but most Jews did not consider this conversion at all because they had no reason to be jealous of the Christian religion.

Despite serious flaws in the gentile Christian appropriation of the Hebrew prophets, it resulted in a broad dissemination of their books in almost the whole world. This enabled later gentiles to read the prophets from other perspectives, for instance as advocates of social justice. But that is another story and should be investigated in another article.

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Notes

- ¹ Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Batra* 14b; in fact, this passage deals with the order of the books. The treatise dates to ca. 550–600 CE, but this section elaborates upon an earlier source (Ellis 1988, p. 660; Lightstone 2002, p. 178). The “Twelve” are Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi.
- ² Subsequent references to years and centuries are always to CE, “of the Christian/Common Era”, unless BCE is added, “before the Christian/Common Era.”
- ³ Jerome, in his preface to the books Samuel and Kings in his Latin version of the Bible, called the *Vulgate* since the 16th century (Weber 1969, vol. I, pp. 364–65; ed. and French trans. Canellis (Jérôme 2017, pp. 326–31)).
- ⁴ In Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History* 4.26.14 (Eusebius of Caesarea 1926). By Ezra Melito probably meant the apocryphal work “4 Ezra” in which Ezra is called—and is called as—a prophet (cf. *Barnabas* 12.1 [Section 4]). It used to be included in old editions of the King James Version of the Bible; also (Metzger 1983).
- ⁵ *Prophecies collected from all books* (Patrologia Latina Supplementum 1, col. 1738–41).
- ⁶ *Catechetical Lectures* 4.35 (Cyril of Jerusalem 1989). The Epistle of Jeremiah is also regarded as Baruch ch. 6, now included in the Apocryphal or Deuterocanonical books.
- ⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmina* 1.12 (Patrologia Graeca 37, col. 473–74).
- ⁸ *The Christian Doctrine* 2.8.13 [26–27] (Augustine of Hippo 1995a); cf. *The City of God* 18.26–37 (Augustine of Hippo 1954).
- ⁹ Christological homilies and commentaries on a selection of the Psalms or all of them were written by, e.g., Origen of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose of Milan, Jerome and Augustine. For the New Testament see, e.g., Matt 13:35, 21:9, 22:44, 26:38, 27:35, 43, 46, John 2:17, 12:13, 15:25, 19:24, 1 Cor 15:25, Heb 1:13, 5:6, 10:5, etc.
- ¹⁰ (Isaac 1983); Tertullian quotes it in his treatise *The Apparel of Women* 2.1 and 3.4 (Tertullian of Carthage 1959).
- ¹¹ *The City of God* 15.23, 18.38 (Augustine of Hippo 1954).
- ¹² For the New Testament, see also Steve Moyise's contribution to this issue of *Religions*.
- ¹³ See, e.g., the quotations from Isa 53, the chapter on the suffering servant of the Lord, in Matt 8:17, John 12:38, Acts 8:32, Rom. 10:16, 1 Pet 2:22, 24–25; and allusions to it in Matt 20:28, 26:63, Rom 4:25.
- ¹⁴ See, e.g., (quotations attributed to Jesus himself being in **bold**): Matt 1:23 (Isa 7:14), 2:6 (Mic 5:1, 3), 2:15 (Hos 11:1), 2:18 (Jer 31:15), 4:15–16 (Isa 8:23–9:1), 8:17 (Isa 53:4), **9:13** (Hos 6:6), **10:35**, 12:7 (Mic 7:6), 12:18–20 (Isa 42:1–4), **12:40** (Jonah 2:1), **13:14–15** (Isa 6:9–10), **15:8–9** (Isa 29:13), 21:5 (Isa 62:11, Zech 9:9), **21:13** (Isa 56:7, Jer 7:11), **24:15** (Dan 7:29, 11:31, 12:11), **24:29** (Isa 13:10; 34:4), **24:30** (Dan 7:13); **26:31** (Zech 13:7), **26:64** (Dan 7:13), 27:9 (Zech 11:13), **Luke 4:18–19** (Isa 61:1–2).

- 15 The references can easily be found in annotated Bibles.
- 16 Rom 14:11 (Isa 49:18; 45:23), 15:12 (Isa 11:10), 15:21 (Isa 52:15).
- 17 1 Cor 1:19 (Isa 29:14), 1:31 (Jer 9:23–24), 2:16 (Isa 40:13), 14:20 (Isa 28:11–12), 15:32 (Isa 22:13), 15:54–55 (Isa 25:8, Hos 13:14).
- 18 1 Pet 1:24–25 (Isa 40:6–8), 2:6 (Isa 28:16), 2:12 (Isa 10:3), 2:22–25 (Isa 53:4–9), 3:14 (Isa 8:12).
- 19 Heb 8:8–12 (Jer 31:31–34), 10:16–17 (Jer 31:33–34), 10:37–38 (Isa 26:20; Hab. 2:3–4), 12:26 (Hag 2:6).
- 20 Acts 7:42–43 (Amos 5:25–27), 7:49–50 (Isa 66:1–2), 8:32–33 (Isa 53:7–8), 13:40–41 (Hab 1:5), 13:47 (Isa 49:6), 15:16–17 (Amos 9:11–12), 28:26–27 (Isa 6:9–10).
- 21 The only Hebrew, partially Aramaic, quotation from the Old Testament is Ps 22:2 in Matt 27:46, *Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani*, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (The parallel Mark 15:34 reads *Eloi, Eloi*.)
- 22 *1Q Peshar Habakkuk* (García Martínez and Tigchelaar 1997, pp. 10–21).
- 23 (García Martínez and Tigchelaar 1997, pp. 8–11, 20–23, 312–41). Compare Isa 40:3 (about the way to be prepared in the desert) quoted in *1Q Rule of the Community* 8.14 (García Martínez and Tigchelaar 1997, pp. 88–89), and in Matt 3:3 and Gospel parallels: the same prophetic text applied to different contexts.
- 24 e.g., John 7:40–44, Acts 7:51–54, 23:1–10, 28:23–28.
- 25 *1 Clement* 16 (Ehrman 2003, vol. 1, pp. 62–65).
- 26 Barnabas 2.4–3.5 (Ehrman 2003, vol. 2, pp. 14–19). The author betrays his gentile origin in Barnabas 16.7, “Before we believed in God, the dwelling place of our heart was corrupt and feeble... full of idolatry...” (Ehrman 2003, vol. 2, pp. 72–73).
- 27 *Dialogue* 109.1–110.1 (Justin Martyr 2003).
- 28 *Against the Heresies*, 3.16.2, 3.21.1, 3.21.4, 4.23.1, 4.33.4 (Irenaeus of Lyons 2012); *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 53–54 (Irenaeus of Lyons 2002; J. Layton 1948, pp. 64–66, 238–39, 253–54; Benoît 1960, pp. 74–102).
- 29 Irenaeus is excluded from this observation, because he did not address the non-Christian Jews but Gnostic and Marcionite “heretics” and occasionally Jewish Christians. See Section 5.
- 30 *On First Principles* 4.2.1 (Origen of Alexandria 2017). In fact, Origen quotes a version of Amos 3:6 that diverges from the Septuagint, viz. “there is no evil...”
- 31 *Against the Heresies* 1.30.11 (Irenaeus of Lyons 1992; Roukema 2019, pp. 24–25). For Micah the son of Imlah see 1 Kings 22:8–28.
- 32 *On Illustrious Men* 61 (Jerome 1999).
- 33 *Commentary on Daniel* 4.5.4–6, 4.10.4, 4.11.1–5, 4.12.2 (Hippolytus 2017).
- 34 *Epistles* 33.4, from 384 (Jérôme 1951).
- 35 *Homilies on Ezekiel* 1.4 (Origen of Alexandria 2014, pp. 416–17).
- 36 *Proof of the Gospel* 1.6 (Eusebius of Caesarea [1920] 2000).
- 37 For textual testimonies of John Chrysostom’s *Commentary on Isaiah* see (Smelova 2013).
- 38 The translator Lipatov, however, attributes the commentary to Basil himself and dates it to 362–363 CE (Basil the Great 2001, p. i).
- 39 This also holds for Cyril of Alexandria, see Section 8.
- 40 *On Heresies* 37 (Augustine of Hippo 1995b).
- 41 See Robert Ch. Hill in (Theodoret of Cyrus 2006, vol. 3, p. 332).
- 42 e.g., Isa 2:4, 11:10, 19:24–25, 25:6–7, 41:1, 42:6, 49:1, 49:6, 51:4–5, 52:10, 55:4–5, 56:7, 60:3, 66:18.

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