ALL THINGS TO ALL PEOPLE: JUSTIN MARTYR’S EXEGESIS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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INTRODUCTION

Justin Martyr was born in Flavia Neapolis around 100 C.E. His father was Priscus, the son of Baccheius. Justin was raised and educated as a Gentile (Dial. 2-8). For many years, Justin sought truth among the Stoics, Platonists, and Aristotelians (Dial. 2). After becoming convinced that the truth was not to be found in these philosophical systems, he encountered an old nameless man respectable in appearance (Dial. 3). This man taught him that divine truth could be found only in the prophets. God spoke through the Hebrew prophets in anticipation of the coming of Jesus Christ. These prophecies were specific in nature. They were also written long before the coming of Christ. After the man had provided Justin sufficient proof that Christ had fulfilled these prophecies, Justin writes, “Immediately a fire was kindled in my soul and a love of the prophets and those men who are friends of Christ possessed me” (Dial. 8).¹ Justin claims that this only is the “certain and advantageous philosophy,” “φιλόσοφιάν ἀσφαλῆ τε καὶ σύμφορον” (Dial. 8).² Having converted to Christianity, Justin dedicated his life to the defense of the faith, an endeavor that eventually ended in martyrdom sometime between 163 and 167.³

Justin Martyr is a fascinating character in early church history. Theologians and church historians list him among the Apologists, a group comprised of “Aristides, Justin Martyr, Melito of Sardis, Athenagoras of Athens, Tatian, and Theophilus of Antioch.”⁴ These defenders of the faith wrote at a time of great upheaval. Jews and Christians had parted ways on unfriendly terms. The revolt of Bar Kochba around 133-135 was a disaster. Jewish Christians refused to take up arms against the Romans. As a result, writes Powlison, “they were punished as traitors to the Jewish faith and driven out of Jerusalem.”⁵ After the Romans had put down the rebellion, they

¹ My translations are provided unless otherwise indicated.

² All Greek text for the writings of Justin Martyr are taken from Justin Martyr, Patrologiae Graeca, vol. 6: Justin Martyr, ed. by J. P. Migne (Montrouge, 1857).


erected temples to Jupiter and Venus and expelled Jews from the city. The Jews, feeling betrayed, took up polemics against the Christians. The schism between Judaism and Christianity meant that Christians had potentially lost all claim to a historic religion, which in turn resulted in persecution from the Roman state.

Justin was a man of courage. He boldly stood against the Roman Senate in his *Apologies*, and he blazed a trail in reconciling the Old Testament Scriptures with the apostolic faith in *Dialogue with Trypho*. Despite the shared animosity between pagan, Christian, and Jew, Justin dared to engage his “enemies.” In the *Apologies*, he dispelled popular myths about Christianity, and he communicated the tenets of the faith in Hellenized terms. In *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin utilized rabbinic rules of interpretation in order to prove that the Scriptures testified about Christ. This paper contends that Justin Martyr applied Hellenistic thought and Jewish methods of interpretation to the Old Testament within the rubric of a Christo-centric exegesis in order to be all things to all men in service of the cause of Christ. For these reasons, Justin Martyr has garnered the attention of students and scholars, and also has merited the attention of this paper.

**JUSTIN IN CONTEXT AND IN DISTINCTION**

Justin lived and wrote at a time when many philosophies and religious systems laid claim to divine truth. The pantheons of the Greeks and Romans held sway over the general populous. Platonist, Aristotelian, and Stoic doctrines had taken root. The ancientness of Jewish monotheism garnered the toleration, if not respect, of the Greco-Roman world. The fledgling Christian church, though still in danger of persecution, had gained momentum; yet how could the Christian church continue to grow when the whole world was against her? Justin’s formulation of Christian doctrine and his interpretative methods must be understood against the backdrop of Hellenism, Judaism, and those Christian thinkers that labored with him. It is against this backdrop that one understands how Justin has synthesized Hellenistic thought, Judaism, and

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6 Ivor J. Davidson, *The Birth of The Church: From Jesus to Constantine, A. D. 30-312*, 146.


9 Jew and Gentile alike persecuted the leaders of the church. Stephen was martyred by a Jewish mob. Ignatius and Polycarp were both martyred by the state.
Christianity into a viable system that does not compromise apostolic preaching and is compelling to the Jewish and Greco-Roman mind.

**Greek Philosophy**

Although much could be said about Greek philosophy and the appearance of Greek philosophy in the writings of Justin Martyr, for the purpose of this discussion only matters that pertain to Justin’s interpretive practices are discussed. A smattering of doctrines on God, reason, and revelation, from Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics are included in this discussion.

The Greek philosophical conception of God was polyvalent. Aristotle, Plato, and the Stoics all possessed unique metaphysical systems; yet in the second century a general eclecticism dominated. Bits and pieces from the various systems of thought were brought together. L.W. Barnard observes that eclecticism was a dominant feature of the Middle Platonism of Justin’s day.

In accordance with this eclectic mindset, the Middle Platonists and Justin accept Aristotle’s unmoved mover. Justin takes and ties this doctrine to the Platonic concepts of transcendence and immutability. Commenting on 2 Apology 7.9, Erwin Goodenough writes, “Justin particularly rejects the Stoic conception of immanence . . . God must not, he insists, be identified with the things which are ‘ever changing and altering and dissolving into the same things.’ On the contrary it is one of the chief distinguishing characteristics of God that He alone is *unchangeable* and *eternal*.”

God as the immutable, eternal, and unmoved mover is central in explaining Justin’s view of the divine Logos and his role in the economy of the Godhead.

The doctrine of the logos can be traced throughout Hellenistic thought. As early as 500 B.C.E. Heraclitus used the term to describe “an underlying coherence or principle of the universe.” The Stoics picked up and expanded the doctrine of the logos. For the Stoic, it is the

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11 In *Dialogue* 127.2 Justin writes, “For, the ineffable Father and Lord of all neither comes to any place, nor walks, nor sleeps, nor arises, but always remains in his place, wherever it may be, acutely seeing and hearing, not with eyes or ears, but with a power beyond description. Yet he surveys all things, knows all things, and none of us has escaped his notice. *Nor is he moved who cannot be contained in any place, not even in the whole universe, for he existed even before the universe was created*.” *Dialogue with Trypho*, Translated by Thomas B. Falls, ed. by Michael Slusser (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 191.


orderly principle of the world and is also the rational faculty that orders the life of culture, art, politics, and the mind.\footnote{Ibid.} The cosmic logos is what makes human logos possible.

Philo, an Alexandrian Jew who lived from 20 B.C.E to 50 C.E., increases the philosophical/theological freight of the word. The “λόγος θεοῦ” is an extension and manifestation of God’s power. God is utterly transcendent, and he must have a mediator. R. M. Wilson writes, “as abstract Being God must be beyond and above the world . . . God’s nature forbade contact with matter, so He made use of his powers instead.”\footnote{R. M. Wilson, “Philo,” International Standard Bible Commentary, vol. 3, ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1986), 849.} The logos, one of “these powers,” created the world.\footnote{“The first stage in the creation of the world is the formation of an intelligible universe. To describe this formation Philo used the analogy of an architect forming the plan of a city in his mind, before he ever sets it down on paper, much less begins to build. This intelligible universe is no other than the Logos of God when God was already in the act of creating; through the agency of the Logos the visible world came into being.” R. M. Wilson, “Philo,” 849.} Philo describes the logos as the first-born son, the image of God, and his High Priest.\footnote{R. B. Edwards, “Word,” 1104.} These expressions are not Christian readings of the Old Testament. Philo utilizes these anthropomorphic expressions to describe the relationship God has to his logos. Philo’s conception of the logos does not attain the status of personhood. The creating, ordering, and reasoning facilities of God’s logos enable mankind to order the world around them and obtain knowledge of God through their own facilities of reasoning, “λόγος.” Justin’s concept of the divine Logos flows from this fount.

Justin’s concept of the divine Logos is derived from but not dictated by philosophy. Justo González writes, “Making use of a very widespread idea among Greek philosophers, Justin affirms that all knowledge that men have is the product of the logos.”\footnote{Justo L. González, A History of Christian Thought: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon, vol. 1 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1970), 104.} In \textit{Apology} 2, Justin writes, “Reason (λογός) dictates that those who alone are pious and philosophical honor and love truth.” Reason forces men to seek the truth and honor justice. Justin appeals to reason, truth, and justice in hopes that the authorities will put an end to the persecution of Christians. Reason extols the virtues practiced by the Christians. Reason should not suffer the immorality and wickedness

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{1} Ibid.
\bibitem{3} “The first stage in the creation of the world is the formation of an intelligible universe. To describe this formation Philo used the analogy of an architect forming the plan of a city in his mind, before he ever sets it down on paper, much less begins to build. This intelligible universe is no other than the Logos of God when God was already in the act of creating; through the agency of the Logos the visible world came into being.” R. M. Wilson, “Philo,” 849.
\end{thebibliography}
found in the state-condoned religion of the pantheon. Justin writes, “For not only do the Greeks condemn these things through Socrates by the word, but they are also condemned among the Barbarians (Jews) by the Word himself, who took shape and became man” (1 Apology 5). This is an important junction in the work. Justin denounces the state religion with the aid of Socrates, then he moves to shame his readers by claiming that even the Barbarians (Jews) know these things, all the while introducing a distinctively Christian concept of the logos.

The Logos is not, as in the philosophy of Philo, an impersonal force or power that emanates from God. The Logos is a personal being; he has taken the form of a man. Again González writes, “For [Justin], this logos is not only the rational principle of the universe, but is also the pre-existent Christ of the prologue of the Fourth Gospel.”19 Other than identifying the Logos as the pre-existent incarnate Christ, how else does Justin conceive of the Logos?

Justin conceived of the Logos as a second God. The Logos was begotten of God, not made. Justin writes, “...we claim that the Word (λόγον), who is the first born of God, was begotten (γέννημα) without intercourse (ἐπιμυξίας) . . .” (1 Apology 21). Though the Logos partakes in the same nature as God, the act of begetting does not diminish the Father. Goodenough’s paraphrase of Dialogue 61.2 concisely communicates this point: “in telling our thoughts to others, while something has gone out from us our thought life has not in the least been diminished within us.”20 Justin elsewhere uses the image of the fire from one torch used to light another. The fire of the original torch is in no way diminished (Dial. 128). In what way, then, does the begotten Logos help Justin in his interpretation of Scripture and communication of truth? The begotten Logos, according to Justin, functions as a mediator between the transcendent God and his creation. The Logos is the medium through which revelation takes place.

Revelation of the one true God is always tied to the Logos. This is altogether consonant with Justin’s belief that God is discernible to the mind only.21 Christ is the “‘Sowing Word’ (λόγος σπερματιός)” and he sows the “‘seed of the Word’ (σπέρμα τοῦ λόγου)” in the minds of men.22 Writing on the sown seed, John Behr says:


21 David Ivan Rankin, From Clement to Origen (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 97.

22 John Behr, The Way to Nicaea (Crestwood St: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 106.
Such a seed of the Word gives [men] a dim perception of ‘the whole Word,’ the Son, so that some, like Plato and Socrates, were enabled, through their natural constitution (possessing a seed of the Logos), to live and think, or at least attempt to do so, according to the Word. So Justin can claim that Christ ‘was partially known even by Socrates, for he was and is the Word who is in every person’ (1 App. 10:8), and that ‘whatever things were rightly said among all people, are the property of us Christians . . . For all the writers were able to see realities darkly through the presence in them of an implanted seed of the Word’ (1 App. 13:4-5).  

This is not the only way the Logos reveals himself and the Father to mankind. If it were, humanity would have no way of truly knowing God. The “seed of the Word” only reveals in part. It is necessary to encounter the whole Logos. The whole Logos can be encountered in three ways. The Logos spoke through the written Scriptures, appeared to men in the Old Testament, and became man, revealing himself and the Father in full.

The wholly otherness of God made it impossible for him to communicate with man without the use of the Logos. Once again the Platonic concepts of transcendence and immutability appear. Justo González writes, “In order to communicate with this world, God has begotten the logos, whose function is to act as an intermediary between the father and his creation.” This divine “work around” preserves the nature of God, while retaining the divine origin of Scripture. Willis Shotwell, writing about Justin’s view of the inspiration of Scripture, says, “God had spoken to the Old Testament writers through the Divine Logos or the Holy Spirit. These prophets had written down the messages given to them. Because the words were inspired by God, they were of inestimable value and could not contradict one another.” Since Christ as Logos is the ultimate source of Scripture, it is no wonder that the Scriptures bear witness to his coming. Rejection of Christ is rejection of the author of the Old Testament; acceptance of Christ dictates a Christo-centric reading of the Old Testament.

Linked to the revelatory work of the Logos is Justin’s concept of Christophanies. David Aune writes, “One of [Justin’s] more permanent contributions was his Christological interpretation of Old Testament theophanies.” All instances where God appears to men in the Old Testament are Christological events. How could it be anything other than the physical

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23 Ibid., 106-7.


appearances of the Logos? God cannot come down from his place on high. This is the job of his Logos. Justin uses this framework to interpret a number of Old Testament narratives in his dialogue with Trypho. Justin recounts Genesis 18-19. Herein, three men appear to Abraham, share a meal with him, and promise him offspring. As they depart, the Lord stays behind in order to share with Abraham what he is about to do with wicked Sodom and Gomorrah. After citing the relevant portions of the story, Justin writes:

Do you not now see, my friends, that one of the three, who is both God and Lord, and ministers to him who is in heaven, is Lord of the two angels? . . . He, indeed, is the Lord who was commissioned by the Lord in heaven, that is, the Creator of all things, to inflict those dreadful punishments upon Sodom and Gomorrah, which are described in the Scriptures.

Dialogue 127 contains Justin’s rapid succession of comments on Genesis 17:22, 11:51 and 7:16. Justin writes, “And I presume that I have shown sufficiently that when God says, God went up from Abraham, . . . and The Lord went down to see the tower which the children of men built, or God closed the ark of Noah from the outside, you should not imagine that the Unbegotten God himself went down or went up from any place.” The obvious answer to this rhetorical question is, “No.” No man has seen the Father and creator of all men; all men who have encountered the divine have seen the Son.

Finally, the Logos appeared on the scene as Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 1 Apology 31:7-8 contains the basic content of the faith. Christ’s coming in the manner predicted in the

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26 González writes, “The multiple manifestations of God in the Old Testament are theophanies not of the Father, but of the logos, which is the mediator and revealer, for even ‘he who has but the smallest intelligence will not venture to assert that the Maker and Father of all things, having left all super celestial matters, was visible on a little portion of the earth.’” A History of Christian Thought, 108.

27 Dialogue with Trypho 56.

28 Ibid., 127.

29 It is important to mention that Justin subordinates the λόγος to the Father. The mediatorial role is beneath the Creator God. It is difficult to determine whether or not Justin believes the Son ontologically inferior to the Father. Either way, Irenaeus takes umbrage with Justin’s formulation of the Father’s relationship to the Son.

30 “In these books, then, of the prophets we found Jesus our Christ foretold as coming, born of a virgin, growing up to man’s estate, and healing every disease and every sickness, and raising the dead, and being hated, and unrecognized, and crucified, and dying, and rising again, and ascending into heaven, and being called, the son of God.” Justin Martyr, “1 Apology,” Ante-Nicene Fathers: Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, vol. 1 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 173.
Hebrew prophecies confirms that he is the Λόγος θεοῦ. Salvation is provided for all who truly know and live according to the revelation of God.

Justin’s concept of the Logos allowed him to legitimize Christianity in the eyes of the pagan world. He willingly adopted its manner of speech and appropriated, insofar as it was consistent with apostolic preaching, its philosophical concepts in the service of Christ. The concept of the logos, though, was not exclusive to pagan thought. Hellenistic Judaism, as represented in the works of Philo, engaged in a project similar to that of Justin’s. It is no surprise that Justin kept intact his concept of the Logos when he engaged Trypho. The argument retained its effectiveness.

**Gnosticism/Marcion**

Gnosticism is also a religious outworking of Platonic thought.\(^\text{31}\) Within the framework of Gnosticism, the spirit is of utmost value. Material is a lesser good, if it can be called good at all. The spirit has been separated from the divine and has been imprisoned within the material world. It is incumbent upon men to turn from the material world and recognize the divine spark within them. For the Gnostic, Jesus was not *incarnate* God. Jesus took on the form of a body, but he was not, in his essence, man. He came from heaven in order to reveal to mankind secret knowledge. This secret knowledge is the only means by which man can recognize his true origin and be liberated from the prison of the body.\(^\text{32}\) This attempt to provide a rationalistic explanation for Christian teaching was eventually rejected by the church.

Marcion, a contemporary of Justin, though not a true Gnostic, shares a number of similarities with Gnosticism. Marcion claimed that the God of the Old Testament, the Creator God, was wicked. The God of the New Testament is of a higher order, and his ethic is greater. Marcion could not believe that the God of Christianity could have been responsible for the atrocities contained within the Jewish Scriptures. His solution to the relationship between the Old and New Testaments was rather drastic. He claimed that the Old Testament was the possession of the Jews and had no place within the church. Marcion finds the Old Testament to be useful

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\(^{31}\) This is not to say that all things Platonic are Gnostic, or that all things Gnostic are Platonic.

only in demonstrating that a second messiah would come.\textsuperscript{33} It is to Christ, the second messiah, represented in the writings of Paul and parts of Luke that the Christian looks. The Jews were free to worship a lesser evil God if they so chose, but the Christians would take no part.

What was it that distinguishes Justin from the Gnostics and Marcion? They all endeavored to explain the Christian faith by the tools of philosophical thought. How is it that Justin maintained orthodoxy and the Gnostics and Marcion were condemned as heretics? The answer to these questions can be reduced to their starting principles. The Gnostics and Marcion used the Scriptures in order to prove their prior commitment to philosophical systems. Justin sought to explain Christianity with the vocabulary made available by the philosophies of the day. Adolf Harnack writes, “The theses of the Apologists finally overcame all scruples in ecclesiastical circles and were accepted by the Graeco-Roman world, because they made Christianity rational without taking from or adding to, its traditional historic material.”\textsuperscript{34} Justin rebranded Christian tradition in rational Greek thought without significantly altering its contents in order to make it understandable and appealing to the Greco-Roman mind.

\textbf{Judaism}

Justin took great pains to demonstrate the truthfulness of Christianity from a Greco-Roman perspective. It would have been easy for him, especially considering the hostilities between Jews and Christians, to stop here. Gaining the favor of the state would have been sufficient. Instead, Justin commits to arguing for the truthfulness of Christianity to the Jews. He even goes so far as to avoid using the New Testament and appeals wholesale to the Old Testament Scriptures in order to not create an unnecessary stumbling block. Furthermore, he regularly employs Jewish exegetical principles, and he applies them to the interpretation of the Old Testament. How much stronger would Justin’s argument be if he had established it from texts and by principles familiar to the Jews? The question then becomes, “How accurate is Justin’s understanding of Judaism and Jewish interpretive practice?”

\textsuperscript{33} Henning Graf Reventlow, \textit{History of Biblical Interpretation}, Volume 1: From the Old Testament to Origen, 151, represents Marcion’s view of prophecy. While Justin believed that the prophecies about a messiah had no remote reference, Marcion believed that the prophecy was literally fulfilled at that time. He specifically refers to Isaiah 7:14, 8:4 and applies the texts to Hezekiah. Hezekiah was the anointed one of God that Isaiah had in mind. Yet, he also claims that there must have been a second messiah to come. Marcian identifies the second messiah as Christ. This allows him to demonstrate that the Old Testament has no need of being appropriated by the Church; it can be left to the Jews.

Though Justin’s conversation with Trypho exhibits evidence that he puts words in Trypho’s mouth, it is also evident that the Dialogue represents a generally accurate picture of Judaism. Theodore Stylianopoulos, citing Goodenough, writes, “Although Trypho is often a mere tool in Justin’s hands, Justin is, as Goodenough puts it, ‘by no means beating the air in his discussion with Trypho,’ since he reproduces ‘with extraordinary accuracy the attitude of many Jews of the time.’”35 One sees Justin’s knowledge of Judaism in his use of exegetical principles derived from Hillel when interpreting Old Testament texts.36

Hillel, writing during the first century B.C.E., formulates seven rules of interpretation. These rules become the basic principles of rabbinic interpretation. The seven rules are as follows: minor to the major, analogy on the basis of a single word, a principle from a verse, a principle from two verses, a general principle to a particular principle and vice versa, a principle from similar passages, and “deduction from context.”37 Space does not permit a thorough investigation of Justin’s use of each principle, but a few occurrences are cataloged below.

Justin is particularly fond of the argument from the general to the specific or specific to the general, “kelal uferat uferat ukelal.” Justin claims in Dialogue 19:3 that the Gentiles have no need of circumcision. In order to prove this general statement, Justin references multiple instances in the Old Testament where circumcision was not necessary for individuals God accepts as righteous. Justin writes, “For if it were necessary, as you think, then God would not have made Adam uncircumcised, nor would he look upon the gifts of Abel, who, when in uncircumcision of the flesh he offered sacrifices. He would not have been pleased in the uncircumcision of Enoch . . .” Justin also includes Lot, Noah, Melchizedek, and Abraham in this


36 Justin’s understanding of post-biblical Judaism can also be seen in the views held by Trypho. It must be kept in mind that Trypho’s words are communicated through Justin. Often Trypho concedes at points that would be contrary to rabbinic thought. A. J. B. Higgins writes, “The messianic ideas expressed by Trypho bristle with inconsistencies which no amount of ingenuity can resolve into a harmonious picture. This is due to the ill-matched combination of genuinely Jewish beliefs and of Christian doctrines which Justin has put into Trypho’s mouth for apologetic purposes.” “Jewish Messianic Belief in Justin Martyr’s Dialogue with Trypho,” Novum Testamentum. 9 no 4 (October, 1967), 305.

list. These specific examples prove the general principal that the Gentiles have no need of circumcision. Justin uses the same argument with reference to the Sabbath (Dial. 23).\footnote{Willis Shotwell observes, “In xxiii he points out that nature does not keep the Sabbath. In the same chapter he points out that the righteous men before Moses did not keep the Sabbath . . . This is an excellent example of reasoning from particular instances in which the Sabbath was not kept to the general idea that Sabbath observance was not necessary,” The Exegesis of Justin Martyr, 42.}

Deduction from the minor to the major, “\textit{kal vahomer},” is used in Justin’s interpretation of Deuteronomy 27:26, “Cursed be everyone that abides not in the words of the book of the Law so as to do them.” He writes, “Not even you will dare to assert that anyone ever fulfilled all the precepts of the Law exactly.”\footnote{Dialogue with Trypho 95.} Not even the most devout Jew is capable of keeping the whole law, for he will transgress it at some point. Justin then moves to show how much more the Gentiles are under the curse. “Since they commit idolatry, seduce youths, and perform other wicked deeds?” Having proved that all are under the curse of the Law, Justin moves to demonstrate that the cross of Christ does not disqualify him from the role of messiah. Christ has shouldered the curses of all men through his death on the cross.\footnote{Ibid.}

Finally, Justin draws conclusions by use of analogy. Shotwell writes, “Justin’s use of analogy may be divided into four types; the inference from two objects in the same verse, the inference from similar ideas, the inference from two objects in two verses, and the inference from one passage by the similar in another.”\footnote{Peter W. Martens, “‘Anyone Hung on a Tree is Under God’s Curse’ (Deuteronomy 21:23): Jesus’ Crucifixion and Interreligious Exegetical Debate in Late Antiquity,” Ex Auditu. 26 (2010), 74-5.} Justin uses this exegetical principle when he interprets Genesis 19:24-25, Joshua 5:13-6:2, Psalm 110, Isaiah 52:8, and Isaiah 55:3-5.\footnote{Willis Shotwell, The Exegesis of Justin Martyr, 43.} Dialogue 62 uses this principle throughout the chapter. Justin recounts the creation account. In Genesis 1 God says, “Let \textit{us} make man in \textit{our} image.” Justin infers that since there is more than one contained in the pronoun \textit{us}, then God must be more than one. In Joshua 5:13-6:2 there are two individuals speaking, the chief commander and Joshua. Later in the narrative, the Lord
speaks with Joshua. Since there are only two individuals present in the narrative, it must be true that the chief commander is the Lord.\textsuperscript{44}

Justin was not deluded into thinking that he provided interpretations of the Scriptures that were agreeable to his Jewish audience. This was not his concern even when he formulated his understanding of the Scriptures in terms of Greek philosophy. He was concerned about framing his argument according to the acceptable methods of his audience. Justin accomplished exactly that by appealing almost exclusively to the text of the Old Testament instead of the New Testament. He furthered his purposes by using Hillel’s principles of interpretation when providing Trypho with a Christo-centric reading of the Old Testament.

**Contemporaries**

Due to the nature of the apologetic task, Justin naturally shares a number of similarities with his fellow apologists. Most, if not all, of the apologists sought to end the persecution of Christians by the state. This forced them to interact with Greek philosophy and theology. In so doing, the apologists engaged with Judaism. How, then, does Justin differ from his colleagues?

Aristides, the earliest of the Apologists, shares some similarities with Justin. They both criticize Greek mythology and the morality of the gods. They both also reproduce the Christian kerygma as axiomatic for understanding the Scriptures.\textsuperscript{45} Justin and Aristides differ in their assessment of Greek philosophy and Judaism. Aristides accuses the Jews of angel worship. The Greek philosophers are not accorded divine knowledge as in Justin. They are criticized and discredited. Of the four major groups of peoples (polytheists, Greeks, Jews, and Christians), only the Christians remain. The Christians alone possess truth, and live holy lives.\textsuperscript{46}

Athenagoras’ chief concern was to bring about a more just treatment of Christians. He attempted to accomplish this task by proving that the only form of philosophy punished by the state is atheism. The Christians’ conception of God is like that of the former philosophers. The main difference between Justin and Athenagoras is in the relationship between philosophy and Christianity. Athenagoras believed that the philosophers could never know the full truth about

\textsuperscript{44} Willis Shotwell, *The Exegesis of Justin Martyr*, 47.

\textsuperscript{45} Adolf Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 179.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
God because their search for knowledge was born from themselves. A true and complete knowledge of God can only come through revelation.

Finally, Tatian, one of Justin’s disciples, takes a hostile approach to Greek philosophy. He claims that what little truth they have obtained was stolen from the writings of Moses. What is worse, that which was stolen was “reproduced in a distorted form.” The difference between Justin and Tatian is readily seen. Tatian accused the Greeks of plagiarism and intentional corruption of the Scriptures; Justin was charitable in his assessment of Greek philosophy by affirming what he believed was agreeable and by explaining inconsistencies as due to incomplete revelation.

Though Justin shares a number of similarities with the rest of the Apologists, the general tenor of his work is more amicable. He finds value not only in Greek philosophy, but also finds value in the philosophers themselves. He claims that they have in part received revelation by God’s Logos. Justin also engages with Judaism. He does not act as if they have been completely supplanted. Though the Christians are the true people of God, he prays that Trypho and others will rejoin the covenant people of God through faith in Christ. All hope is not lost for the physical line of Abraham. This is all a part of Justin’s program to proclaim the apostolic faith.

**JUSTIN’S INTERPRETIVE PRINCIPLES**

Justin’s interpretive principles are diverse, and are seemingly used at random. Though Justin is one of the first systematic thinkers of the church, his style is far from systematic. Nevertheless, a close reading of his works reveals a coherent approach to the Old Testament. Justin believes that the Old Testament was shrouded in mystery. Christ’s coming serves as the interpretive key to understanding these mysteries. Although Christ serves as the interpretive key to unlock the mysteries of the Old Testament, men remain in darkness until God grants understanding. Having grasped the mystery of Christ through God’s gift of understanding, the interpreter can correctly understand the Law and the two comings of the messiah through the use of literal, allegorical, and typological exegesis.

**Foundational Matters**

Justin’s interpretation of the Old Testament is distinctly Christian. There are three non-negotiable elements in Justin’s interpretation that are foundational to his exegesis. First, the Old

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Testament was cloaked in mystery. It cannot be rightly understood until after the Christ event. Second, Christ is the interpretive key of the Old Testament. Finally, Christ is not understood as the interpretive key of the Old Testament until God grants this truth to men.

Justin uses the term μυστήριον, “mystery,” more than any other Jewish or Christian interpreter before his time. Though the term is used as a descriptor for the mystery cults that existed both before and during his time, Justin primarily uses the term for other purposes. Justin’s use of the word “alleges that an additional meaning has newly become knowable after (and in light of) the historical occurrence of Christ.”

The term occurs in connection with σημείον, “sign,” σύμβολον, “sign or seal,” τύπος, “type,” and παραβολή, “parable.” Willis Shotwell writes, “They all point to the hidden element of a predictive nature that is in the Scripture . . . Announcements and predictions are merely another way of referring to the hidden predictive element in Scripture.” Thus, the prophetic texts of the Old Testament have a twofold function: to proclaim the coming of Christ and to conceal the manner of his coming until the appropriate time. Justin writes, “And for this reason the Holy Spirit obscurely (παρακεκάλυμμένος) spoke these things in a parable (παραβολῇ)” (52). In chapter 76 he expands this concept saying:

For if through the prophets it was proclaimed obscurely (παρακεκάλυμμένος κεκήρυκτο) that the Christ would suffer, and after all these things would become Lord of all, but then indeed no one was able to understand (οὐδενός νοεῖσθαι ἐδύνατο) until he persuaded the apostles that these things were proclaimed explicitly in the Scriptures (ἐν τοῖς Γραφαῖς ταῦτα κεκηρύχθαι διαρρήδην).


49 T. J. Lang observes that of the forty-five uses of the word in Justin’s extant writings, only seven instances refer to the pagan mystery cults.

50 Ibid.

51 T. J. Lang has provided an extensive chart including all significant occurrences of these terms in Justin’s Dialogue. Μυστήριον occurs in 24.1; 40.1; 43.3; 44.2 (2x); 68.6 (2x); 74.3; 75.1; 76.1; 78.9; 81.3; 85.7; 86.6; 91.1; 91.3; 94.2; 94.4; 97.4; 100.1; 106.1; 111.2; 112.3; 115.1; 120.5; 125.3; 131.2; 131.4; 134.2; 134.5; 138.1; 138.2; 139.1; 141.4. σημεῖον 84.1; 84.2; 90.3; 90.5; 91.4; 93.5; 94.1 (2x); 94.2; 94.3; 94.5; 107.1 (4x); 108.1; 111.4; 112.1; 112.2; 131.4; 137.1 σύμβολον 14.2; 40.3; 42.1; 42.4; 53.4; 68.6; 78.6; 86.1; 88.8; 90.5; 111.1; 111.4 (2x); 112.2; 120.2; 131.5; 138.1; 138.2; 138.3. τύπος 22.3; 40.1; 41.1; 41.4; 42.4; 90.2; 91.2; 91.3; 91.4; 111.1; 111.2 (2x); 114.1; 131.4; 134.3; 140.1. παραβολή 36.2; 52.1; 63.2; 68.6; 77.4; 78.10; 90.2; 97.3; 113.6; 114.2; 115.1; 123.8.

52 Willis Shotwell, The Exegesis of Justin Martyr, 24.
What has changed? The Old Testament Scriptures have moved from παρακεκαλυμμένως, “obscure,” to διαρρήδην “explicit” within the space of twenty-eight words.

The Scriptures themselves have not changed. The ability to rightly understand the Scriptures has changed. The coming of Christ has provided the interpretive grid through which the Scriptures must be read (Dial. 7.3; 44.2). Christ has revealed to his apostles the correct understanding of the Old Testament, and the apostles’ Christo-centric teaching has also enabled the church to correctly interpret the Scriptures.

Simply knowing the biographical details about Christ is not enough. Though Christ is the interpretive key of the Old Testament, God must first grant the gift of understanding. Justin writes, “For it is not that I have a certain ability, but grace alone has been given to me from God in order to understand his Scriptures (χάρις παρὰ Θεοῦ ἐδόθη µοι ἐπὶ τὸ συνιέναι τὰς Γραφὰς αὐτῶν ἔδοθη µοι)” (Dial. 58). This grace is not exclusive to Justin. It is an abundant and freely shared gift for all who seek it. Once this grace is imparted to the interpreter, he is capable of correctly understanding Christ’s relationship to the Scriptures.

Justin’s conviction that the Scriptures are interpreted through the lens of Christ, and that God alone grants understanding is foundational to early Christianity. Elowsky, writing on Justin and Irenaeus’ conception of Scripture, says:

Christ was not the fathers’ only interest in their interpretation of Scripture. He was, however, their prime interest and the focal point of their exegesis. They also believed one could not discern this without the gift of the Spirit, a gift which comes through prayer. Patristic exegesis was Christocentric exegesis because it was the exegesis done in faith, exegesis done in service to the church, and exegesis done with a view to the end.53

Justin’s Christo-centric exegesis obtained from God through prayer allows him to maintain continuity between the ancient Scriptures and apostolic preaching. It has the added benefit of providing an explanation for why the Jews refuse to accept Christ as their Lord; they cannot rightly interpret Scripture until God graciously grants them understanding.

**Distinctive Elements in Justin’s Exegesis**

Almost immediately after Justin provides biographical details about his journey among the philosophers and his conversion, the topic of the Law arises. Trypho accuses the Christians of claiming to be more pious than the Jews even though they do not separate themselves from the

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53 Joel C. Elowsky, “With a View to the End: Christ in the Ancient Church’s Understanding of Scripture,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*. 70 (1, 2006), 82.
world, observe circumcision, the Sabbaths, or the Law (Dial. 10.3). Justin’s response to these accusations and his understanding of the Law can be found throughout the *Dialogue*. Justin’s approach to the Law can be described in two parts. First, there are elements contained within the Law of Moses that are eternal. The Christians uphold these elements, for they are universally binding on all men. Justin claims that the man who “observes the eternal principles (καὶ φυλάσσει τὰ αἰώνια δίκαια) is circumcised with the good and advantageous circumcision, (περιτέτημα τὴν καλὴν καὶ ωφέλιμον περιτομήν)” (Dial. 28.4). Justin also writes, “For also in the Mosaic Law are the things that are by nature good and are for piety and righteousness . . . Since [Noah, Enoch, Jacob, and others] did the things that are universally (καθόλου), naturally (φύσει), and eternally good (αἰώνια καλὰ), they are pleasing to God . . .” (Dial. 45.3-4). The laws that are universally, naturally, and eternally good promote piety and righteousness. These laws, though Justin never specifically lists them, are in full effect for the Christian.

The second division of the Law is conceived of in two parts: it was given because of the hardness of Jewish hearts, and or, as prophetic witness to the coming of Christ. Regarding the first of these subdivisions, Justin writes that Christians would observe the ritual law including washings, feasts, Sabbaths, and circumcision if they did not know the reason that God commanded these things; they were given, “on account of your lawlessness and hardheartedness” (Dial. 18). The food laws were to keep God ever before the minds of the Jewish people even as they ate to keep them from idolatry (Dial. 20). The Sabbaths, sacrifices, and oblations were commanded because of the people’s wickedness (Dial. 21-22). In support of these claims, Justin cites Ezekiel 20:19-26. Ezekiel, referring to the golden calf, speaks against God’s people because they have been idolatrous and disobedient. For these reasons, “God gave

54 Theodore Stylianopoulos suggests that Justin’s understanding of the Law is tripartite in nature: there are the universal elements, the prophecies about Christ, and the laws that were added because of the people’s hardheartedness, *Justin Martyr and the Mosaic Law*, 51-76. Oskar Skarsaune objects to Stylianopoulos’ assertion arguing that the second and third uses of the Law cited by Stylianopoulos are the same. All ritual laws can be explained within their historical setting on account of hardheartedness, and as witnesses to Christ through the use of typologically or allegorical exegesis, *The Proof from Prophecy: A Study in Justin Martyr’s Proof-Text Tradition: Text-Type, Provenance, Theological Profile*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum vol. LVI (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 323-4. Skarsaune’s view has been adopted as it better explains the fact that in one section of the *Dialogue* Justin will claim that the sacrifices were added on account of hardened hearts, but in another section, Justin claims that the sacrifices offered on the Day of Atonement were types of Christ.

55 Theodore Stylianopoulos includes the following list of places where this language appears: *Dial.* 23.1; 28.4; 45.4; 47.2; 67.10. He notes that these instances are contrasted with the temporary elements in the Mosaic Law: *Dial.* 23.1; 28.4; 39.1. *Justin Martyr and the Mosaic Law*, 56.
them statutes that were not good and rules by which they could not have life.” (Ezek. 20:25).

Ezekiel’s reading of this incident seems to agree with Justin’s understanding of the law: the laws that followed the rebellion were given because of the rebellion.56 This reading allows Justin to reject the Law except the universal bits and the pieces that proclaim the coming of Christ.

Justin’s use of the Law as a prophetic witness to Christ is abundant. The blood of the Passover Lamb is a type of Christ’s blood, which anoints those who believe in him in proportion to their faith (Dial. 40). The two goats offered on the Day of Atonement are types of Christ. For the first goat was splayed out in the shape of a cross and put to death just like the first coming of Christ. The second goat represents the second coming of Christ in that it will be recognized when it is seen again (Dial. 40). The sacrificial offering of fine flour is a type of the Eucharist that purifies the leprous soul (Dial. 41). Circumcision is a type of true circumcision; belief in Christ, who rose on the eighth day and who separates iniquity and deceit from those who believe (Dial. 41). The twelve bells that hang from the priestly robe represent the twelve apostles that spread the word of God into all nations (Dial. 42). The rock that follows Israel in the Old Testament is Christ (Dial. 113.6; 114.2,4). This is an allegorical interpretation of the text that is in harmony with 1 Corinthians 10:4.57

Justin’s dual use of the Law did not arise accidentally. He did not approach the issues in the Law on the fly. Justin writes, “And I say that a certain commandment has been given for piety and righteous living, and another command he similarly spoke which was for the mystery of Christ, or on account of the hardness of your people” (Dial. 44.2). It is clear in this passage that Justin logically separated the Law into these two parts. Removing the legitimacy of the Law for the lives of Christians frees them to live according to the Law of Christ.

In Justin’s efforts to prove that Christ is the messiah, he must explain the humble nature of his coming. Justin accomplishes his task by dividing the “coming” of Christ into a twofold

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56 This is not an endorsement of Justin’s methods. Many adamantly disagree with Justin’s use of the text and his conclusions. David Rokéah writes that “Justin adopted variety of arguments in order to prove his thesis about the temporary nature and invalidity of the Torah: Scriptural exegesis, including questions about the ostensible contradictions within the Torah; misuse of the fault-finding statements of the prophets, by taking them out of context; arguments from nature; and logical reasoning,” Justin Martyr and the Jews. Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series vol. 5 (Boston: Brill, 2002), 51-2.

57 Willis Shotwell makes an important observation about Justin’s use of allegory, “In the Dialogue Justin’s use of the allegorical method is extensive. However, with two exceptions, Justin never makes a predictive allegorical interpretation of Scripture without calling attention to it as having a hidden meaning, or being an obscure saying, a mystery, a sign, an announcement, a symbol, a parable, or a type,” Exegesis of Justin Martyr, 54.
event. Jesus’ first coming would be in the form of the Suffering Servant. The second coming of Christ would be as the Glorious King (Dial. 32.2). In order to demonstrate this thesis, Justin appeals to what he conceives of as the straightforward reading of prophetic texts.

Within the list of texts Justin uses to prove the messianic status of Christ are the prototypical texts utilized by the New Testament writers. Justin uses Isaiah 52-55 in order to prove that the messiah would come in humility. His form would be unrecognizable to men and he would be despised. He would be beaten, bruised, and put to death for the sins of men (Dial. 13-14). Commenting on this text Justin writes, “‘Of these words and other sayings by the prophets,’ I said, O Trypho, ‘they speak about the first coming of Christ, wherein he is proclaimed as without honor, in obscurity, and in mortality” (Dial. 14.8). After prolonged discussion, Trypho admits that Justin has sufficiently proved that the messiah would suffer, be crucified, be taken up into heaven, and return to rule the nations (Dial. 39.7). He nevertheless remains unconvinced that this messiah is Jesus, and he petitions that Justin prove this from the Scriptures. Justin accomplishes this task in Dialogue 75-79 and 82-88. Jesus was born in Bethlehem as Micah 5:2 predicts (Dial. 78.1). Isaiah 7:14 predicted that the Christ would be born of a virgin (Dial. 84.1). Isaiah 11:1-3 claims that he will be of the lineage of David, the son of Jesse (Dial. 87.2). Justin has used these texts, and others, to prove that Jesus was the humble messiah.

The second advent of Christ will be characterized by glory. Justin cites Daniel 7:9-28 as a prophecy about Christ’s return, “For he will come as a Son of Man upon the clouds, as Daniel made known, arriving with his angels. And these are the words, ‘I saw until the thrones were established, and the Ancient of days was seated . . . ’” (Dial. 31.1). The one who sits upon that throne is Christ as Psalm 110:1-7 proclaims, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies for your footstool . . . You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek’” (Dial 32.6). Justin recognizes that Trypho believes that the Lord spoken of here is Hezekiah. Preempting Trypho’s objection, Justin writes, “And you would not dare to deny that Hezekiah neither was nor is an eternal priest of God. But this is written concerning our Christ . . .” (Dial. 33.1). When Christ’s Second Advent arrives, those who pierced him will recognize him and mourn (Dial. 32.2).
JUSTIN IN PERPETUITY

The enduring influence of Justin is most clearly felt in the writings of Irenaeus. Irenaeus, writing during the late second century, drew heavily from the writings of Justin Martyr. This does not mean that he was hopelessly tied to Justin; it does mean that Justin laid the foundation that Irenaeus later modified and built upon. This is readily seen in Irenaeus’ understanding of revelation and the relationship of the Logos to the Godhead.

First, revelation of God is known through the Scriptures. These scriptures include both the Old and New Testaments. For Irenaeus, the Old Testament could not be understood apart from Christ as preached by the apostles. John Behr writes, “The apostolic preaching, the presentation of Christ according to the Scriptures, is the key to understanding Scripture fully. In doing this, Irenaeus was following in well-established tracks, and indeed many of the texts he uses . . . can already be found in Justin.”58 The cross of Christ provides a correct reading of Scripture. Irenaeus writes in the fifth book of Against Heresies 5.17.4, “Therefore, that which has been hidden from us, the dispensation of the tree has made known, as we have said beforehand. For since we lost the Word through a tree, it was again revealed to everyone though a tree.” The first tree is an obvious reference to the Fall of Adam. The second tree mentioned is the cross of Christ.

Though Justin and Irenaeus are in agreement on matters of Scriptural interpretation, they diverge in their presentation of the Logos. First, Irenaeus modifies Justin’s formulation of the seeds of the Logos. Justin believes that Christ has sown the seed of the Word in the hearts and minds of individuals personally and through their reading of Scripture. The sown seed is proper knowledge of God. Irenaeus, though, believes that the seed that has been sown is Christ. Behr writes, “For Irenaeus, the one who is sown is Christ, and he is inseminated in Scripture.”59 Thus, the authors of Scripture have written about Christ. Though the treasure of Christ may be hidden in a field (AH. 4.26.1), his presence is not therein diminished.

The second difference between Irenaeus and Justin is the ontological relationship between the Father and the Son. Justin’s view that the Son, Logos, is subordinate to the Father is unacceptable. Irenaeus maintains that the Father does not take physical form and must remain in


59 Ibid., 117.
Heaven, but he does not view the acquisition of material form or the function of the Logos as in any way inferior to that of the Father. Irenaeus claims that if the Logos became a lesser divinity, John is wrong to say, “The one who has seen me has seen the Father.” (Jn. 14:9). The Logos is not a lesser divinity. He is equal with God both in terms of ontology and economy.

CONCLUSION

Justin’s need to defend the Christian faith against the Jewish and Hellenistic worlds posed interesting challenges. In order to meet those challenges, Justin adopted some of the concepts and methods of his interlocutors in order to prove Christ on their terms. He applied the Greek formulation of god as the eternal, transcendent, immutable, unmoved mover to the biblical concept of God. He used the Hellenistic concept of the logos and applied it to the incarnate Christ. Justin utilized Jewish methods of interpretation, he argued almost exclusively from the Old Testament, and he showed familiarity with rabbinic teaching in order to prove to Jews that the Old Testament pointed to Christ. This Christo-centric understanding of the Old Testament is granted to interpreters as a gracious gift from God received through prayer. Justin uses literal, typological and allegorical methods of interpretation in service of Christo-centric exegesis and demonstrates the continuity between the Old Testament and apostolic teaching in his formulation of the Law and two comings of Christ. Justin’s interactions with the pagans and the Jews coalesce into a comely presentation of apostolic teaching that has successfully synthesized the contemporary thought of his day. Though Justin’s language could at times be polemical and abusive, he excludes neither Gentile nor Jew from God’s plan of redemption. He exhibits genuine concern for his interlocutors. Finally, the importance of Justin’s thought for the church cannot be measured; yet his impact on Irenaeus, one of the great Trinitarian theologians, is unquestionable.

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61 John Behr writes, “So there seem to be, as it were, two Justin’s: the Justin of the Apologies, who addressed the Greek world and was prepared to see in Greek philosophy a means of partially knowing God, and the Justin of the Dialogue, who engaged with Jewish thought, demonstrating on the basis of Scripture that Christ is indeed the Son of God, *The Way to Nicaea*, 107.
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