

ZECHARIAH 13:6 – OF FALSE PROPHETS, FARMHANDS, ... (AND PLAYBOYS?)¹

I. INTRODUCTION

The verse Zechariah 13:6, as it appears in King James Version “Old Testament” and several other Christian translations, has been a popular so-called “proof text” in the portfolio of Christian missionaries. It is yet another passage claimed to be a prophecy that foretells the crucifixion of Jesus.

A rigorous analysis of the Hebrew text of Zechariah 13:6 with careful attention to the context of the entire 13th chapter in the Book of Zechariah, demonstrates that the claim is without merit, because it is based on mistranslating this verse and lifting it out of its proper context.

II. COMPARISON OF CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

Side-by-side English renditions of the central passage in Zechariah 13 are displayed in Table II-1. The King James Version (KJV) translation is shown with pointers to cross-referenced passages in the New Testament. These references are taken from the New American Standard Bible (NASB). However, the corresponding passages below the table are quoted from the KJV for consistency. The highlighted words and phrases will be discussed later as part of the analysis.

¹ Transliterations of Hebrew terminology into the Latin alphabet will follow these guidelines:

- Transliterated terminology is shown in ***bold italicized*** font
- The accented syllable in transliterated terminology is shown in **SMALL CAPS** font
- Latin vowel-sounds, A – E – I – O – U, are used (not the English versions thereof!)
- Distinct Hebrew letter that have ambiguous Latin letter sounds are transliterated according to the following rules:
 - A vocalized letter **א** is transliterated as the equivalent Latin vowel
 - A vocalized letter **ב** is transliterated as the equivalent Latin vowel with an added underscore
 - The letter **ג** is transliterated as “**h**”
 - The letter **ד** is transliterated as “**ch**”
 - The letter **ק** is transliterated as “**k**”
 - The letter **ך** is transliterated as “**q**”
 - A vocalized **SHVA** (**וְ אֵי**) is transliterated as a superscripted “**e**” following the consonant
 - There is no “doubling” of letters in the transliterations to reflect the **dagesh** (emphasis)

Table II-1 – Zechariah 13:3-7

	King James Version Translation	Jewish Translation from the Hebrew	The Hebrew Text
Zechariah 13			זְכַרְיָה יג
3	And it shall come to pass, that when any shall yet prophesy, then his father and his mother that begat him shall say unto him, Thou shalt not live; for thou speakest lies in the name of the LORD: and his father and his mother that begat him shall thrust him through when he prophesieth.	And it shall come to pass, if a man still prophesies, then his father and his mother, who bore him, shall say to him, "You shall not live; for you have spoken falsely in the name of the Lord;" and his father and his mother, who bore him, shall thrust him through while he prophesies.	ג וְהָיָה כִּי-יִנְבֵּא אִישׁ עוֹד וְאָמְרוּ אֵלָיו אָבִיו וְאִמּוֹ יִלְדָּיו לֹא תַחֲיֶה כִּי שָׁקֵר דְּבַרְתָּ בְשֵׁם יְהוָה וְדָקְרָהוּ אֲבִיהוּ וְאִמּוֹ יִלְדָּיו בְּהִנְבְּאוֹ :
4	And it shall come to pass in that day, that the prophets shall be ashamed every one of his vision, when he hath prophesied; neither shall they wear a rough garment to deceive. ⁽ⁱ⁾	And it shall come to pass on that day, that the prophets shall be ashamed, each one of his vision when he has prophesies; and they will not wear a hairy mantle in order to deceive;	ד וְהָיָה בְּיוֹם הַהוּא יִבְשׁוּ הַנְּבִיאִים אִישׁ מִחֲזִינוֹ בְּהִנְבְּאוֹתָו וְלֹא יִלְבְּשׁוּ אֲדָרְתַּת שַׁעַר לְמַעַן כַּחַשׁ :
5	But he shall say, I am no prophet, I am an husbandman; for man taught me to keep cattle from my youth.	And he shall say, "I am not a prophet; I am a tiller of the soil, for a man entrusted me with his cattle from my youth."	ה וְאָמַר לֹא נְבִיא אִישׁ-עֶבֶד אֲדָמָה אֲנֹכִי כִּי-אָדָם הִקְנִנִי מִנְעוּרַי :
6	And one shall say unto him, What are these wounds in thine hands? Then he shall answer, Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends.	And someone will say to him, "What are these wounds between your hands?" And he shall say, "Because I was beaten in the house of those who love me."	ו וְאָמַר אֵלָיו מַה הַמַּכּוֹת הָאֵלֶּה בֵּין יָדֶיךָ וְאָמַר אֲשֶׁר הַכִּיתִי בֵּית מֵאֵהָבָי :
7	Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones. ⁽ⁱⁱ⁾	O sword, awaken against My shepherd, and against the man who is associated with Me! says the Lord of Hosts. Smite the shepherd, and the flock shall scatter, and I will return my hand upon the lower ones.	ז חָרֵב עוּרִי עַל-רַעִי וְעַל-גֹּבֵר עַמִּיתִי נֹאֵם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת הַדְּ אֶת-הָרֹעֶה וְתִפּוּצִין הַצֹּאֵן וְהִשְׁבַּתִּי יָדִי עַל-הַצְעָרִים :

(i) Matthew 3:4(KJV) - And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.

(ii) Matthew 26:31(KJV) - Then saith Jesus unto them, All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad.

Mark 14:27(KJV) - And Jesus saith unto them, All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered.

With one notable exception, the two translations are reasonably consistent. Even the portions that are cross-referenced in the New Testament do not contain any gross mistranslation by the KJV translators. The exception is Zechariah 13:6, where the KJV, among a small number of other Christian translations, falsely translates as **in** the Hebrew word בֵּין (*BEIN*), **between**, thereby effecting a contextual change in the question from "... What are these wounds **BETWEEN** thine hands? ..." to "... What are **these wounds in** thine hands? ...". The result of this mistranslation is that a rather obvious Christological significance has been infused into the entire verse. It is

interesting to note that most other Christian translations have retained the more general concept of someone with contusions on his upper body – chest & back – which is consistent with the meaning of the Hebrew text.

III. OVERVIEW OF CHRISTIAN AND JEWISH INTERPRETATIONS

A. The Christian perspective

According to the Christian view, Chapter 13 of Zechariah is fertile with Christological innuendo. The foretelling of the remission of sins and the silencing of false prophets point to the initial Christian "messianic era", i.e., the first century C.E. This idea is further amplified with a claim of the prophetic suffering of Jesus and the dispersion of his disciples, of the destruction of the greater (unbelieving) part of the Jewish nation not long thereafter, and of the purification of a (believing) remnant of them, a distinctive group of people to God.

The New Testament reference passages quoted below Table II-1 appear to be invoking phrases found in various verses in the chapter. The "... raiment of camel's hair ..." worn by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:4) alludes to a garment traditionally worn by Jewish prophets that is mentioned in Zechariah 13:4. The phrases "... I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered ..." (Matthew 26:31) and "... I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered ..." (Mark 14:27) represent the fulfillment of an alleged prophecy about the suffering of Jesus and the dispersal of his followers, which is found in a similar phrase in Zechariah 13:7(KJV), "... smite the shepherd, and the flock shall be scattered ...".

It is interesting to note that Zechariah 13:6, the one verse from this chapter most often used by Christian missionaries as a so-called "proof text", was not invoked or alluded to in the New Testament by any of its authors. From their silence on this contemporary Christian missionary "proof text", it appears that the authors of the New Testament did not perceive it as having any Christological significance.

More detailed commentary may be found in the standard Christian commentaries such as, Matthew Henry and Jamieson, Fausset, & Brown.²

B. The Jewish perspective

The 13th chapter in the Book of Zechariah includes a collection of messianic prophecies and, in that respect, the Christian and Jewish perspectives are consistent. The major gap between the two views concerns the identity of the Messiah.

The era in which the events described in this chapter will take place is identified in Zechariah 13:1 as being the messianic era. The description of the *spring of*

² These commentaries are available at - <http://www.blueletterbible.org/>

living water that will be flowing in Jerusalem, something that was never there before, is an allusion to the messianic era. A reference to this spring is found again in the next chapter:

Zechariah 14:8 - And it shall be on that day, that **living water shall go out from Jerusalem** - half of it toward the eastern sea, and half of it toward the western sea; in summer and in winter it shall be.

Ezekiel also speaks of this flowing water in his description of the Third Temple:

Ezekiel 47:1 - And he brought me back to the door of the house and, behold, **water flowed from under the threshold of the house eastward**, for the front of the house faced to the east; and the water came down from beneath, from the right side of the house, from south of the altar.

The first six verses of this chapter deal with the removal of impurity from Judah. Zechariah speaks of a false prophet stabbed to death by his parents for his deceitful activities. The prophet also describes the lamenting by the false prophets about being farm hands and shepherds from their youth, and having been assaulted and beaten up in familiar surroundings.

The last three verses of the chapter describe the punishment of (a sword turned against) the enemies of Israel. The leaders of the (Gentile) nations were the shepherds, God's colleagues, to whom He entrusted the fate of His people Israel (the flock). However, when they oppress instead of guard "the flock", God will unleash the sword against them. Then, the flock will be free to escape, and God will turn His vengeance even against the subordinates who helped molest Israel.

IV. A CLOSER LOOK AT ZECHARIAH 13:6

A. The traditional approach: The false prophet and foolish shepherd

As noted above, Zechariah 13:6 is used by Christian missionaries as a "proof text" that foretells the crucifixion of Jesus:

Zechariah 13:6 - And someone will say to him, "**What are these wounds BETWEEN your hands?**" And he shall say, "**Because I was beaten in the house of those who love me.**"

Zechariah 13:6(KJV) - And one shall say unto him, **What are these wounds IN thine hands?** Then he shall answer, **Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends.**

When this verse is read alone, without the rest of the verses around it, it could leave the (false) impression of an allusion to the suffering that Jesus endured around the time of his crucifixion. However, when the verse is read in context, a rather different picture emerges about this wounded individual. The backdrop for the scenario is set up in the two preceding verses:

Zechariah 13:4-5 – (4) **And it shall come to pass on that day, that the prophets shall be ashamed, each one of his vision when he prophesies; and they will not wear a hairy mantle in order to deceive.** (5) **And he shall say, "I am not a prophet; I am a tiller of the soil, for a man entrusted me with his cattle from my youth."**

This individual in Zechariah 13:6, the one with the contusions from being beaten, turns out to be a *false prophet*, even though he wore the *hairy mantle*, which was a distinctive garment worn by prophets of Israel (see, e.g., 1Kings 19:13,19; 2Kings 2:8,13,14). These false prophets will eventually disown their "calling" and claim to belong to the humblest working class. A similar declaration, though in a reversed sense – a true prophet humbly declaring that he does not profit from his prophecies (unlike a false prophet who is remunerated for prophesying) – is found in the Book of Amos:

Amos 7:14 - And Amos replied and said to Amaziah, "I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet; but I am a cattle herder and an examiner of sycamores."

Zechariah 13:7 is also a verse that is important to the context, particularly as it applies to the claims made by Christian missionaries:

Zechariah 13:7 - "O sword, awaken against My shepherd, and against the man who is associated with Me!" says the Lord of Hosts. "Smite the shepherd, and the flock shall scatter, and I will return My hand upon the lower ones."

This shepherd is also the one previously described as both *foolish* and *worthless*:

Zechariah 11:15-17 – (15) And the Lord said to me, "Take for yourself yet another thing, the instrument of a foolish shepherd. (16) For, behold! I am setting up a shepherd in the land, he will not remember [to count] those who are missing, nor will he seek the young ones, nor heal the broken one; nor will he feed the one which stands still, but he will eat the meat of the healthy ones, and break their hoofs into pieces. (17) Woe to My worthless shepherd who abandons the flock; may a sword strike his arm and his right eye; his arm shall surely wither, and his right eye will go completely blind."

The fate of this *foolish* and *worthless* shepherd is a certainty; he will be smitten.

Does Zechariah 13:6 still "point" to Jesus when read in context? It is not likely that Christians will agree to characterize Jesus, their lord and savior, as being a *false prophet* and a *foolish* and *worthless* shepherd.

B. Another approach: The false prophet and the “playboy” farmhand

Another way to read the passage, especially Zechariah 13:4-6, gives an interesting twist to this prophecy.

The stage is set in the opening verse of the chapter, which implies that sins such as idolatry and other abominations will be rampant in the land at some time in the future, and that a spring of living water flowing from the Temple grounds will be available for the spiritual and ritual purification of the people. Then, by applying alternative, yet perfectly correct, translations to the terms **הִקְנָנִי** (*hiqnani*) in Zechariah 13:5 and **מְאָהָוִי** (*m^eahavai*) in Zechariah 13:6, a rather different interpretation of the passage emerges.

The term **הִקְנָנִי** in Zechariah 13:5, a “poetic” contraction of the phrase

הִקְנָה אוֹתִי (*hiqNAH OTI*), is commonly translated as **[he] entrusted me with his cattle**, since the Hebrew word for cattle is מִקְנֵה (*miqNEH*), which derives from the same verbal root. However, the term הִקְנִי also has a different meaning. The conjugated & inflected verb הִקְנִי derives from the root קנה (*QOF-NUN-HEH*), **[to] buy**, and is the past tense conjugation in the *hif'IL* stem (the active causative form of a verb in Hebrew grammar) and means **he who has turned over possession of me [to others]**, or **he who has made [others] buy me**. When combined with the reference to the subject's youth, this could easily mean that these people, in addition to being healthy young farmhands, May have also been “**hired out**” for some other purpose.

The word מְאַהֲבֵי in Zechariah 13:6, a “poetic” contraction of the phrase הַמְאַהֲבִים שְׁלִי (*ha'm^eahavim sheli*), provides the clue to what that other purpose might have been. The word מְאַהֲבֵי, commonly translated as **those who love me**, or **my friends**, also has another, actually more accurate, meaning that is lost in these common renditions. This word, מְאַהֲבֵי, means **my (male) lovers**, or **my paramours**, i.e., **those who desire me [sexually]**. It is the plural form of the masculine noun מְאַהֵב (*m^eahEV*), a **[male] lover**, inflected the 1st-person singular, masculine (and feminine) gender, **my [male] lovers** [in the romantic sense; the plural, מְאַהֲבִים (*m^eahavim*), can be applied in either the masculine or a generic context]. The noun מְאַהֵב is derived from the root verb אהב (*Alef-HEH-VET*), **[to] love**, conjugated in the *pi'EL* stem (the active intensive verb form in Hebrew grammar).

The Hebrew Bible contains 16 instances of this noun, in various inflexions, and in all cases it is used in the romantic context that goes along with sexual desire or lust. Table IV.B-1 shows these 16 instances of the noun and their common translations in Jewish and Christian renditions of the respective passages.

Table IV.B-1 – The noun מְאַהֵב in the Hebrew Bible

Hebrew Term	#	Pronunciation	Form of noun	Citation	Typical translations (Christian [KJV] & Jewish [ArtScroll Stone Tanach])
מְאַהֲבֵיךָ	7	<i>m^eahavAyich</i>	2 nd -person, singular, feminine	Jeremiah 22:20,22, 30:14; Ezekiel 16:33,36,37, 23:22	thy lovers/your paramours
מְאַהֲבֵיהָ	5	<i>m^eahavEha</i>	3 rd -person, singular, feminine	Ezekiel 23:5,9; *Hosea 2:9,12,15	her lovers/her paramours
מְאַהֲבֵי	4	<i>m^eahavAi</i>	1 st -person, singular, masculine/feminine	*Hosea 2:7,14; Lamentations 1:19 Zechariah 13:6	my lovers/my paramours my friends/those who loved me

* The verses Hosea 2:7,9,12,14,15 correspond to Hosea 2:5,7,10,12,13 in Christian bibles

The proper term to be used in describing those who love someone, not necessarily in the romantic sense, and inflected in the 1st-person, singular, masculine or feminine gender, is אוֹהֲבֵי (*ohavai*), **those who love me**. This

noun also derives from the same root verb **בָּהַב**, except that it derives from the *pa'AL/QAL* stem, the basic Hebrew verb form. The Hebrew Bible contains 20 instances of the noun **בָּהַב** (*OHAV*), in various inflexions, five of which are of the particular form **בֵּהַבִּי** – at Exodus 20:6**, Deuteronomy 5:10**, Psalms 38:12, Proverbs 8:17,21. [** - includes the preposition **לְ** (*le-*), **to** or **for**].

Tilling the land can cause wounds on one's hands and arms, perhaps even on one's legs and feet; but what could cause wounds "between the hands", i.e., across the chest and perhaps on one's back? In what type of activities did these youthful farmhands, shepherds, and false prophets engage when they were not tilling the land, watching the herds, and spouting false prophecies? Could they have been "playboys for hire" who were roughed up by those who "rented" them?

Surely Christians would not want to have a "type and shadow" of their lord and savior Jesus someone who is a false prophet and a youthful farmhand hired out to engage in acts to which the Hebrew Bible refers as abominations.

These two perspectives on Zechariah 13:6, in context, should serve as sobering "food for thought" to all who attempt to use this verse as a prophecy of Jesus' death.

Sidebar note about true prophets: Who were the (true) prophets and prophetesses of Israel? What distinguished them from the others? While the gift of prophecy included an ability to foretell the future, a prophet was far more than a person with that capability. A prophet was a spokesperson for God, a person ostensibly "chosen" by Him to speak to people on His behalf and convey a message or teaching. [True] prophets were role models of holiness, scholarship, and closeness to God, setting the standards for the entire community. Moreover, the primary job of a prophet was not to foretell the future, but to arouse the people and the government to repentance and observance. In the process of executing their primary mission, the prophets often resorted to the description of future events - some in the near future, some in the intermediate future, and some in the distant (messianic era) future.

V. SUMMARY

The analysis of the 13th chapter in the Book of Zechariah demonstrates the importance of reading and understanding a verse or passage in its proper context.

The claim made by Christian missionaries concerning Zechariah 13:6 has been shown to be without merit. Moreover, it is noteworthy that, in their silence on this verse, the authors of the New Testament found no Christological significance in it. This would indicate that the presence of this verse in the portfolio of Christian missionaries is a much more recent development. Perhaps this is the reason that many legitimate Christian apologists no longer use Zechariah 13:6 as a "proof text".