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Jewish and Christian readings of the Hebrew Bible
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How to Read the Bible - A Guiding Jewish Principle:

Yevamot 24a: GEMARA: The Sages taught the following interpretation of the verse: “And it shall be that the firstborn that she bears shall be established in the name of his dead brother and his name will not be blotted out of Israel” (Deuteronomy 25:6). … “And his name will not be blotted out of Israel.” This excludes the case where the deceased was a eunuch, as his name is already blotted out, [since it is impossible for him to have children]. Rava said: Even though in the entire Torah a verse does not depart from its literal meaning, here the verbal analogy [that the inheritance shall be in the “name” of the dead brother is so that his “name” will not be blotted out.] comes to remove the verse from its literal meaning altogether.

Rashi on Yevamot 24a:
A verse does not depart from its literal meaning - Even though we give homiletical interpretations different than the literal meaning; nonetheless, the literal meaning does not entirely disappear. Remove altogether - that there is no need to name the son after the deceased brother.

Rashi, preface to commentary on Song of Songs:
One thing God has spoken; two things have I heard (Psalms 62:12). One verse can have several meanings, but in the end a verse does not depart from its literal meaning. And even though the prophets spoke in metaphorical language, we need to understand the metaphor in structure and context, just as the verses are ordered one after another.

Sota 16a:
For Rabbi Yohanan taught in the name of Rabbi Yishmael: Halakha uproots Scripture in three instances:
(1) The Torah said (Lev 17:13): “[And if any Israelite or any stranger who resides among them hunts down an animal or a bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it] with earth.” But halakha [teaches that the slaughtered animal’s blood may be covered] with anything;
(2) The Torah said (Num 6:5): “[Throughout the term of his vow as Nazirite, no] razor [shall touch his head].” But halakha [teaches that for a Nazirite, shaving is forbidden] using any item;
(3) The Torah said [that a man who divorces his wife hands her] (Deut 24:1): “a book [of divorcement].” But halakha [teaches that the divorcement document may be written] on any material [not just a book].
Verses from the Hebrew Bible:
Isaiah 7:14-16: Assuredly Adonai will give you a sign of God’s/[His] own accord! Look, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. Let her name him Immanuel. (By the time he learns to reject the bad and choose the good, people will be feeding on curds and honey.) For before the lad learns to reject the bad and choose the good, the ground whose two kings you dread shall be abandoned.

P’shat - What do these verses mean?
First of all, the word alma/הָמְלַע, like the Greek word parthenos (the translation of alma/הָמְלַע in the Septuagint on Isaiah 7:14), simply means young woman. Parthenos is used by the Septuagint to translate both alma/הָמְלַע and the Hebrew na’arah/ַעַנּ (girl). Just as the phrase ‘young woman’ in English does not imply that she is (or is not) a virgin, so too the words alma/הָמְלַע and parthenos are equally ambiguous. Na’arah/ַעַנּ is used both in places where the context makes clear that the girl is a virgin (such as the story of Rebecca, Genesis 24:16 and 24:43) and in places that imply that the girl is not a virgin (see the story of the rape of Dina, Genesis 34). If Isaiah wanted to say without question that the girl who was to give birth was a virgin, he would have used the word הָלְוָתִּי.

In the broader context of the chapter, Isaiah is sent by God to reassure King Ahaz, King of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, that the Northern Kingdom of Israel (called here Ephraim), allied with the Assyrian empire, would not harm his kingdom. Isaiah tells him that God will provide a sign of God’s immanence (meaning of Emmanuel), that the young woman (the definite article implies that she was in their immediate presence) would give birth to a son and name him Emmanuel. It is not completely clear whether the sign is the pregnancy, the birth, or the name, but the intent seems to be that before he would grow up, the Northern invasion would no longer be a threat.

How does Christian Scripture use these verses?
Matthew 1:18-25: Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, ’ which means, ‘God is with us.’

The Christian midrashic reading:
The Christian reading is a midrash on the word הָמְלַע, reading it in an artificially narrow and definite sense as “virgin,” and is used to support the claim that the Messiah will be born of a virgin.

How does Jewish Midrash use these verses?
Rashi suggests that the young woman is Isaiah’s wife and that the sign is that she is a young girl and has never before prophesied, yet in this instance, Divine inspiration shall rest upon her. Ibn Ezra (and Radak) suggests that she was Ahaz’s wife and the sign is that she will become pregnant after years of infertility. Others suggest that the sign is that she was a young girl and incapable of giving birth.
Verse from the Hebrew Bible:

Psalms 40:7: You gave me to understand that you do not desire sacrifice and meal offering; You do not ask for burnt offering and sin offering (NJPS).

Sacrifice and meal-offering Thou hast no delight in; Mine ears hast Thou opened; Burnt-offering and sin-offering hast Thou not required (OJPS).

P’shat - What does the verse mean?

In the context of this Psalm, the speaker emphasizes that he has behaved properly towards God, being both publicly and privately faithful towards God’s teaching, and that this is more important than sacrifices and offerings.

How does Christian Scripture use this verse?

Hebrews 10:5-6: Consequently, when [Jesus] came into the world, he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt-offerings and sin-offerings you have taken no pleasure.’

The Hebrew word karita/כַּרְיָה can also mean, “to make a covenant.” Rather than opening us our ears/making us to understand that God does not want offerings (as in the p’shat), Hebrews understands the verse midrashically to say that God make a new covenant with the body [in the midrash, the ears represent the entire body] of Jesus.

How does Jewish Midrash use the verse?

On the day of revelation (i.e., on the day that you “opened my ears”), you didn’t need any offerings - just obedience (Rashi).
Verses from the Hebrew Bible:

Leviticus 17:10-11: And if anyone of the house of Israel or of the strangers who reside among them partakes of any blood, I will set My face against the person who partakes of the blood, and I will cut him off from among his kin. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making expiation for your lives upon the altar; it is the blood, as life, that effects expiation.

P’shat - What do the verses mean?
First of all, it is important to note that the offering that is brought for expiation from sin only applies to unintentional sin, as Leviticus 4:1-2ff makes clear:

Leviticus 4:1-2ff: Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people thus: When a person unwittingly incurs guilt in regard to any of Adonai’s commandments about things not to be done, and does one of them … he shall bring [an offering] without blemish as his offering for the sin of which he is guilty.

The primary intent of Leviticus 17 is to teach that one is forbidden to eat the blood of an animal - that the blood may be used for expiation alone. Note that the Hebrew Bible does not say that atonement, forgiveness from sin, is impossible without a blood sacrifice.

How does Christian Scripture use these verses?

Hebrews 9:22: Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

The Christian midrashic reading:

Hebrews argues that even in a world without a Temple, human beings cannot achieve atonement without a blood sacrifice.

How does the Jewish understanding of expiation differ from the Christian midrash?

There are numerous verses throughout the Bible which speak about ways to atone for sin other than by means of a sacrifice. In fact, Jeremiah cautions against over-reliance on the sacrificial system, and proposes repentance as the primary means of atonement:

Jeremiah 7:3-7, 21-23: Thus said Adonai of Hosts, the God of Israel: Mend your ways and your actions, and I will let you dwell in this place. Don’t put your trust in illusions and say, “The Temple of Adonai, the Temple of Adonai, the Temple of Adonai, are these [buildings].” No, if you really mend your ways and your actions; if you execute justice between one person and another; if you do not oppress the stranger, the orphan, and the widow; if you do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place; if you do not follow other gods, to your own hurt; then only will I let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your ancestors, for all time. … Thus said Adonai of Hosts, the God of Israel: Add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices, and eat the meat! For when I freed your ancestors from the land of Egypt, I did not speak with them or command them concerning burnt offerings or sacrifice. But this is what I commanded them, “Do my bidding, that I may be your God and you may be My people; walk only in the way that I enjoin upon you, that it may go well with you.”

Changing one’s behavior and repenting is also the key to atonement in the following Biblical passages:

Jonah 3:10: God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment God had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out.
Isaiah 1:16-18: Your hands are stained with crime - wash yourselves clean; put away your evil doings away from my sight. Cease to do evil; Learn to do good; Devote yourselves to justice, aid the wronged, uphold the rights of the orphan, defend the cause of the widow. Come, let us reach an understanding, says Adonai. Be your sins like crimson, they can turn snow-white; be they red as dyed wool, they can become like fleece.

Ezekiel 18:20-23: The person who sins, he alone shall die. A child shall not share the burden of a parent’s guilt, nor shall a parent share the burden of a child’s guilt; the righteousness of the righteous shall be accounted to him alone, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be accounted to him alone. Moreover, if the wicked one repents of all the sins that he committed and keeps all My laws and does what is just and right, he shall live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions he committed shall be remembered against him; because of the righteousness he has practiced, he shall live. Is it my desire that a wicked person shall die? Says Adonai God. It is rather that he shall turn back from his ways and live.

II Samuel 12:13: David said to Nathan: 'I stand guilty before Adonai.' And Nathan said to David: 'Adonai has remitted your sin; you shall not die.'

Psalms 51:1-4, 11-19: For the Leader. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him after he had come to Bathsheba. Have mercy on me, O God, in keeping with Your abundant compassion, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly of my iniquity, and purify me of my sin; for I recognize my transgressions, and am ever conscious of my sin. Hide Your face from my sins, blot out all my iniquities. Fashion a pure heart for me, O God; create in me a steadfast spirit. Do not cast me out of Your presence, or take Your holy spirit away from me. Let me again rejoice in Your help; let a vigorous spirit sustain me. I will teach transgressors Your ways, that sinners may return to You. Save me from bloodguilt, O God, God my deliverer, that I may sing forth Your beneficence. Adonai, open my lips, and let my mouth declare Your praise. You do not want me to bring sacrifices; You do not desire burnt offerings; True sacrifice to God is a contrite spirit; God, You will not despise a contrite and crushed heart.

Consider also the following sources for Biblical ways to effect atonement, in which prayer, charity, and even devotion to God itself will atone for since, even when sacrifice cannot:

Micah 6:6-8: With what shall I approach Adonai, do homage to God on high? Shall I approach God with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Would Adonai be pleased with thousands of rams, with myriads of streams of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for my sins? God has told you, mortal one, what is good, and what Adonai requires of you: Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God.

Proverbs 16:6a: Iniquity is expiated by loyalty and faithfulness.

Hosea 14:2-3: Return, O Israel, to Adonai Your God, for you have fallen because of your sin. Take words with you and return to Adonai. Say to God: 'Forgive all guilt and accept what is good; instead of bulls we will pay [the offerings of] our lips.

Daniel 4:24: Therefore, O king, may my advice be acceptable to you: Redeem your sins by beneficence and your iniquities by generosity to the poor; then your serenity may be extended.

Clearly, therefore expiation from sin in the Hebrew Bible requires far more than an offering.
Verse from the Hebrew Bible:

**Micah 5:1**: And you, Bethlehem of Ephrath, **least among the clans of Judah**, from you one shall come forth to rule Israel for Me - One whose origin is from of old, from ancient times.

P’shat - What does the verse mean?
The verse refers to King David, whose family that came from Bethlehem. Note that Micah says that Ephrat was the least among the clans of Judah, which is consistent with a general Biblical principle to elevate the second or later born over the first born in leadership positions, as a way to assert that Divine providence, not birth order or size/importance of the family, is determinative.

Read in a messianic sense, this verse would mean that the origins of a future Messiah go back to ancient time, to the family of David, who came from the clan of Ephrat in Bethlehem.

How does Christian Scripture use this verse?

**Matthew 2:3-6**: When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are **by no means least among the rulers of Judah**; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’

The Christian midrashic reading:
In order to make this verse apply to Jesus (who was not from Bethlehem), Matthew (and Luke) interpret Micah as saying that the future Messiah will merely be born in Bethlehem.

How does Jewish Midrash use the verse?
Rashi suggests that God is promising that the future Messiah will come from the family of David.
Verses from the Hebrew Bible:

Isaiah 52:13-53:12: “Indeed, My servant shall prosper, Be exalted and raised to great heights. Just as the many were appalled at him — So marred was his appearance, unlike that of man, his form, beyond human semblance — Just so he shall startle many nations. Kings shall be silenced because of him, For they shall see what has not been told them, Shall behold what they never have heard.”

“How can believe what we have heard? Upon whom has the arm of Adonai been revealed? For he has grown, by God’s/[His] favor, like a tree crown, Like a tree trunk out of arid ground. He had no form or beauty, that we should look at him: No charm, that we should find him pleasing. He was despised, shunned by men, a man of suffering, familiar with disease. As one who hid his face from us, he was despised, we held him of no account. Yet it was our sickness that he was bearing, Our suffering that he endured. We accounted him plagued, smitten and afflicted by God; But he was wounded because of our sins, crushed because of our iniquities. He bore the chastisement that made us whole, and by his bruises we were healed. We all went astray like sheep, each going his own way; and Adonai visited upon him the guilt of all of us.”

He was maltreated, yet he was submissive, He did not open his mouth; Like a sheep being led to slaughter, Like a ewe, dumb before those who shear her. He did not open his mouth. By oppressive judgment he was taken away, Who could describe his abode? For he was cut off from the land of the living through the sin of my people, who deserved the punishment. And his grave was set among the wicked, and with the rich, in his death— though he had done no injustice and had spoken no falsehood. But Adonai chose to crush him by disease, that, if he made himself an offering for guilt, he might see offspring and have long life, and that through him Adonai’s purpose might prosper. Out of his anguish he shall see it; he shall enjoy it to the full through his devotion. “My righteous servant makes the many righteous, It is their punishment that he bears; Assuredly, I will give him the many as his portion, he shall receive the multitude as his spoil. For he exposed himself to death And was numbered among the sinners, whereas he bore the guilt of the many and made intercession for sinners.”

P’shat - What do the verses mean?

This passage is one of several passages in Isaiah which speaks about a servant or a suffering servant. For other servant passages, see Isaiah 41:8-20, 42:1-9, 44:1-5, 44:21-28, 43, 45, 48:20-21, and 49:1-13.

Many of the servant passages cited above refer to the servant in the plural as in this verse:

Isaiah 43:10: My witnesses are you - declares Adonai - My servant whom I have chosen ....”

Thus, the servant could not be a single messianic figure. Some identify the servant as the people or nation of Israel. Isaiah himself seems to identify the servant this way in a number of the servant passages:

Isaiah 41:8: But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, Seed of Abraham My friend—

Isaiah 44:1-8: But hear, now, O Jacob My servant, Israel whom I have chosen! Thus said Adonai, your Maker, Your Creator who has helped you since birth: Fear not, My servant Jacob, Jeshurun whom I have chosen, Even as I pour water on thirsty soil, And rain upon dry ground, So will I pour My spirit on your offspring, My blessing upon your posterity. And they shall sprout like grass, Like willows by watercourses. One shall say, “I am the Adonai’s,” Another shall use the name of “Jacob,” Another shall mark his arm “of Adonai” And adopt the name of “Israel.”
Thus said Adonai, the King of Israel, Their Redeemer, Adonai of Hosts: I am the first and I am the last, And there is no god but Me. Who like Me can announce, Can foretell it—and match Me thereby? Even as I told the future to an ancient people, So let him foretell coming events to them. Do not be frightened, do not be shaken! Have I not from of old predicted to you? I foretold, and you are My witnesses. Is there any god, then, but Me? “There is no other rock; I know none!”

Isaiah 44:21-28: Remember these things, O Jacob For you, O Israel, are My servant: I fashioned you, you are My servant— O Israel, never forget Me. I wipe away your sins like a cloud, Your transgressions like mist— Come back to Me, for I redeem you.

Shout, O heavens, for Adonai has acted; Shout aloud, O depths of the earth! Shout for joy, O mountains, O forests with all your trees! For Adonai has redeemed Jacob, Has glorified Himself through Israel.

Thus said Adonai, your Redeemer, Who formed you in the womb: It is I, Adonai, who made everything, Who alone stretched out the heavens And unaided spread out the earth; Who annul the omens of diviners, And make fools of the augurs; Who turn sages back And make nonsense of their knowledge; But confirm the word of My servant And fulfill the prediction of My messengers. It is I who say of Jerusalem, “It shall be inhabited,” And of the towns of Judah, “They shall be rebuilt; And I will restore their ruined places.” I, who said to the deep, “Be dry; I will dry up your floods,” Am the same who says of Cyrus, “He is My shepherd; He shall fulfill all My purposes! He shall say of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be rebuilt,’ And to the Temple: ‘You shall be founded again.’”

Even those servant passages which are in the singular could still refer to Israel, which is often personified in the singular as in Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel…,” in which the verb ‘hear’ is in the singular, or in this Isaiah verse, which refers to Israel in the singular (and as a woman!).

Isaiah 54:1: Shout, O barren one, you who bore no child! Shout aloud for joy, you who did not travail! For the children of the wife forlorn shall outnumber those of the espoused — said the LORD.

From a strictly Biblical position, the most likely p’shat is that the servant refers to the nation Israel or to the faithful within Israel. They will be persecuted by other nations (notably, Babylonia) suffer exile for their sins, but God will not abandon them.

How does Christian Scripture use this verse?
Each of the four gospels uses the suffer servant passages to describe the suffering and death of Jesus.

The Christian midrashic reading:
To a large extent, the literary editing of the story of the life and death of Jesus was influenced by the servant passages of Isaiah. Therefore, it is no surprise that one could read Isaiah through Christian midrash and see Jesus quite clearly. The main question is might they reasonably be understood as referring to Israel (or even to Jeremiah or Moses), or is the interpretation of the servant as Jesus exclusive? The beauty of midrash, as opposed to p’shat, is that midrash by definition has multiple layers of meaning. While p’shat is generally defined as the simple meaning intended by the author (although it is rarely so obvious!), midrash invites many, even opposing, interpretations.
How does Jewish Midrash use the verse?

Jewish interpretations of the identity of the servant vary. Rabbi Simlai identifies the servant as Moses:

**Sota 14a**: Rabbi Simlai expounded: Why did Moses our teacher yearn to enter the land of Israel? Did he want to eat of its fruits or satisfy himself from its bounty? But thus spoke Moses, ‘Many precepts were commanded to Israel which can only be fulfilled in the land of Israel. I wish to enter the land so that they may all be fulfilled by me’. The Holy One of blessing said to him, ‘Is it only to receive the reward [for obeying the commandments] that you seek? I ascribe it to you as if you did perform them’; as it is said: Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out his soul unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bare the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:12) … ‘Because he poured out his soul unto death’ — because he surrendered himself to die, as it is said: And if not, blot me, I pray thee … (Exodus 32:32) ‘And was numbered with the transgressors’ — because he was numbered with them who were condemned to die in the wilderness. ‘Yet he bare the sins of many’ — because he secured atonement for the making of the Golden Calf. ‘And made intercession for the transgressors’ — because he begged for mercy on behalf of the sinners in Israel that they should turn in penitence; and the word pegi'ah ['intercession'] means nothing else than prayer, as it is said: Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to Me (Jeremiah 7:16)

Based on a Jeremiah’s description of himself, Sa’adia Gaon identified the servant as Jeremiah:

**Jeremiah 10:18-24**: Woe unto me for my hurt, my wound is severe! I thought, “This is but a sickness and I must bear it.” My tents are ravaged, all my tent cords are broken. My children have gone forth from me and are no more; no one is left to stretch out my tents and hang my tent cloths. For the shepherds are dull and did not seek Adonai; therefore they have not prospered and all their flock is scattered. Hark, a noise! It is coming, a great commotion out of the north, that the towns of Judah may be made a desolation, a haunt of jackals. I know, Adonai, that a person’s road is not his [to choose], that a person, as he walks, cannot direct his own steps. Chastise me, Adonai, but in measure; not in Your wrath, lest You reduce me to naught.

...  

**Jeremiah 11:19**: For I was like a docile lamb led to the slaughter; I did not realize that it was against me they fashioned their plots: Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living. That his name be remembered no more.