MESSIAH BEN JOSEPH: A SACRIFICE OF ATONEMENT FOR ISRAEL

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I have recently addressed common misunderstandings about Messiah ben Ephraim ben Joseph, the eschatological Ephraimite king who is slain before the coming of Messiah ben David.1 I have proposed that, contrary to current opinion, his essential characteristics derive from Deut. 33:17 and so predate the turn of the era.2 Here, I challenge another popular misconception, the widespread claim that Messiah ben Joseph's death has no atoning power. Thus, for instance, Strack and Billerbeck state:

However all the sources that we possess about Messiah ben Ephraim agree on this, that they ascribe no atoning power to his death. It is indicative in this respect that never a word from Isaiah 53 is applied to Messiah ben Ephraim.3

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2 The view that Messiah ben Joseph derives from Deut. 33:17 is, of course, not new. It is found throughout Rabbinic literature and in a number of eighteenth and nineteenth century commentators. But, in the last hundred years, it has been marginalized by the idea that Messiah ben Joseph arose from the downfall of Bar Kokhba. (For the proponents of the different views, see the final pages of “Messiah bar Ephraim”). Part of my task has been to remake in detail the case for the biblical origins of Ben Joseph.

Likewise G.H. Dalman:

None of the passages concerned with him gives his death an atoning value, none speaks of suffering preceding it. 4

And J. Klausner:

It is not necessary to speak at all of the view of those Christian theologians who wish to see in “Messiah ben Joseph” a Messiah who makes atonement for the sins of Israel or of all mankind (a theme found later in the Kabbalistic books, for example, “The Two Tables of the Covenant” by Isaiah Horowitz).... Messiah ben Joseph, who is slain, affords no atonement by his blood and his sufferings are not vicarious. 5

And D. Castelli:

In no stage of the tradition is it said that the Messiah son of Joseph must suffer as an expiator of sins; it is only said there that he will die in battle. 6

And H.H. Rowley:

...there is nothing to suggest that the death of the Messiah ben Ephraim was vicarious.... Still less is there any evidence that the suffering Servant of Is. 53 had anything to do with the Messiah ben Ephraim. 7

All these writers deny any atoning or expiating power to Messiah ben Joseph’s death. Moreover, Strack-Billerbeck and Rowley deny any connection between Messiah ben Joseph and the suffering servant of Hinneh avdi (Is. 52:13–53:12). Dalman suggests that there is no mention of Messiah ben Joseph’s suffering before his death. Klausner dismisses the idea of Messiah ben Joseph’s making atonement for the sins of Israel as a Christian idea, even as he cites by way of example a later work of impeccable Jewish credentials.

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6 D. Castelli, Il Messia Secondo Gli Ebrei (Florence, 1874), p. 228.