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I.

THE CONTROVERSY

The prophecy of Isaiah 52:13—53:12 is the heart of the second section of the book of Isaiah, called the Book of Consolation. Here Messianic vision reaches its pinnacle. For almost two millennia, Jewish and Christian scholars have debated the question of whether the prophet was speaking of himself or of Israel who suffers innocently for the nations of the world. In the New Testament, the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading Isaiah 53 touched on the heart of this question when he asked Philip, the early disciple of

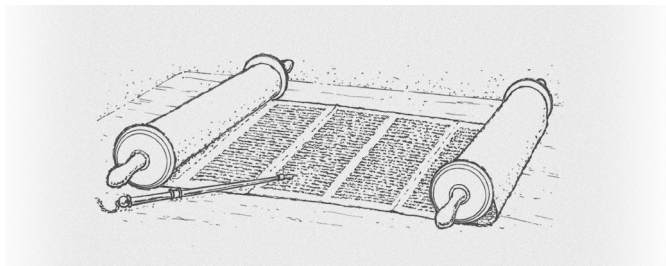
Christ, “I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? Of himself, or of some other man?” (Acts 8:34).

ORIGINAL RABBINICAL VIEW: THE SERVANT IS MESSIAH

Generally, there is little difference between Jewish and Christian translations of this majestic passage of Isaiah, apart from a few words of secondary importance. However, there is a profound and basic difference in the interpretation of the text. For many centuries, ancient Jewish tradition has seen Isaiah 53 as a portrait of God’s suffering servant, the Messiah—a view that is held to this day by most Orthodox Jews.

However, at the end of the 11th century A.D., a change took place. Jewish commentators began to assert that Isaiah spoke of Israel, who suffers innocently for the sins of all nations.

Christians, following the ancient Jewish tradition, maintain that Isaiah 53 speaks of Messiah. Consequently, they see it as an amazing prophecy concerning Jesus, “the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29).



Which interpretation is correct? Only one coincides with the meaning of the words and the context of Isaiah's message, preached more than 700 years before Jesus' birth. And only one interpretation contains the true message that God wants to convey to His beloved people, Israel. We shall examine the controversy: Is Jehovah's suffering servant Israel, or is he Jesus?

Going back to the oldest Jewish interpretations of this passage, we find that the Targum of Jonathan ben Uziel (2nd century A.D.), an Aramaic paraphrase of the Bible, renders Isaiah 52:13 in this way:

Behold my servant Messiah shall prosper; he shall be high, and increase and be exceedingly strong.

The Babylonian Talmud (codified in the 6th century) also applies Isaiah's prophecy messianically:

The Messiah—what is his name? . . . The Rabbis say, “the leprous one.” Those of the house of Rabbi say, “the sick one,” as it is said, “surely he hath borne our sickness” (San 98b).

Midrash Rabbah, referring to Ruth 2:14, explains, *He is speaking of the King Messiah: “Come hither draw near to the Throne; and eat the bread,” that is the bread of the kingdom: “and dip thy morsel in the vinegar.” This refers to his chastisements, as it is said, “But he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities.”*

In the Yalkut Shimoni, a later *Midrash* (rabbinical commentary), it is written,

“Who art thou, O great mountain?” (Zech. 4:7). This refers to the King Messiah, And why does he call him “the great mountain?” Because He is greater than the patriarchs. As it is said, “My servant shall be high and lifted up and lofty exceedingly.” He will be higher than Abraham, who says, “I raise high my hand unto the Lord” (Gen. 14:22). Lifted up above Moses, to whom it is said, “Lift it up into thy bosom”

(Num. 11:12): Loftier than the ministering angels, of whom it is written: "Their wheels were lofty and terrible" (Ezek. 1:18).

These are only a few of the many rabbinical comments relating to Isaiah 52:13—53:12 that, with one accord, apply the section to the Messiah. What caused such a radical change in the rabbinical position?

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CURRENT RABBINICAL VIEW: THE SERVANT IS ISRAEL

Behind this change lies the tragic Jewish experience during the Crusades. After the end of the First Crusade in A.D. 1096, when the Crusaders, in their misguided zeal, attempted to wrest the Holy Sepulcher from the Muslims, they became aware that the infidels were not only "the pagan Muslims" in faraway Palestine but also "the Christ-killing Jews" who were living in their very midst, in so-called Christian Europe. Encouraged by their fanatical

leaders and frequently incited by high-ranking clerics, the Crusaders began massacring Jewish people, especially those who lived in France, Italy, and Germany. Thousands were butchered, their synagogues burned, and their possessions pillaged.

This horrible experience, which lasted for almost two centuries, left a traumatic impact on the Jewish people comparable only to their later experience under Adolph Hitler. From that time on, their revulsion against everything Christians believed or represented became more violent and hostile than ever.

And since the Christians, in their frequent disputes with the Jewish people, used Isaiah 53 as one of their main arguments for the messiahship of Jesus, Jewish people felt impelled to reinterpret this prophecy in such a way as to blunt the Christian argument. Since then, the question of Isaiah 53 has taken on a heated polemical and emotional character.

Another compelling reason to abandon the Messianic interpretation of the controversial passage was that many Jewish people themselves became

convinced that a cogent and strong argument exists for the Christian position. In fact, many actually embraced the Christian faith as a result of the Christian-Jewish disputations of the Middle Ages. During that period, the outstanding Jewish scholar R. Joseph Ben Kaspi (1280–1340) warned the rabbis that “those who expounded this section of the Messiah give occasion to the heretics [Christians] to interpret it of Jesus.” About this statement Rabbi Saadia ibn Danan observed, “May God forgive him for not having spoken the truth.”¹

In any case, since A.D. 1096, Jewish interpreters began to teach that Isaiah’s suffering servant was not the Messiah but, rather, persecuted and suffering Israel, “who is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep . . . openeth not his mouth” (Isa. 53:7).

In light of the Crusaders’ atrocities, this interpretation took on a semblance of verisimilitude and found much favor among the majority of Jews—but not among all of them. Still the original Messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 persisted and survives even to the present day.

It is preserved in Jewish liturgy for the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) in a prayer attributed to Eliezer Ha-Kallir (8th century A.D.):

*We are shrunk up in our misery even until now! our rock hath not come nigh to us: Messiah, our righteousness, hath turned from us; we are in terror, and there is none to justify us! Our iniquities and the yoke of our transgressions he will bear, **for he was wounded for our transgressions:** he will carry our sins upon his shoulder, that we may find forgiveness for our iniquities, and **by his stripes we are healed.** O eternal One, the time is come to make a new creation: from the vault of heaven bring him up, out of Seir draw him forth, that he may make his voice heard to us in Lebanon, a second time by the hand of Yinnon [a rabbinical name of Messiah derived from Psalm 72:17].²*

From Ha-Kallir's prayer, it is obvious that the Jewish people of that era believed the Messiah had already come and were praying that He may come "a second time." Some of the medieval scholars who interpreted this passage in an individual sense applied it either to

Jeremiah or to Isaiah. Others applied it to Hezekiah; and still others, to any righteous person who suffers innocently.

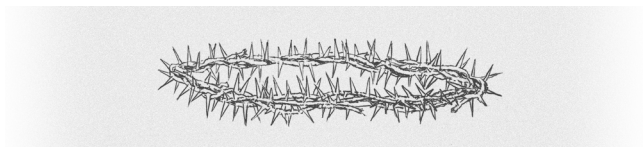
THE TWO-MESSIAH THEORY

Many of the ancient rabbis were aware of the seemingly divergent elements in the Messianic prophecies. Whereas some prophecies spoke of the suffering Messiah (Isa. 50:5–7; 53), others described a triumphant Messiah who will subdue the rebellious nations and establish His Kingdom (Ps. 2; 110). To resolve this problem, the rabbis resorted to the theory of two Messiahs: *the suffering Messiah*, called Messiah ben Joseph, who dies in battle against Edom (Rome); followed by *the triumphant Messiah*, Messiah ben David, who establishes His Kingdom of righteousness after defeating the Gentile nations.³

Another attempt to resolve the seeming contradiction of both a suffering and triumphant Messiah is mentioned in Pesikta Rabbathi. According to this theory, the Messiah ben David suffers in every generation for the sins of each generation. Other rabbinical authorities

sought to find a solution to this puzzle in various ingenious ways, which, however, did not commend them to most Jewish people.

Some rabbinical authorities have postponed the solution of this and all other perplexing questions until the coming of the prophet Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah, who will make all things clear.⁴

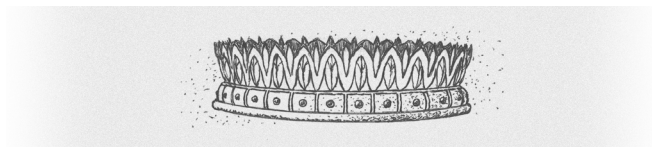


In the New Testament, this apparent contradiction is resolved by the doctrine concerning the First Advent of the suffering Christ followed by His triumphant Second Coming (Mt. 23:29; Jn. 14:3; Acts 1:11; 1 Th. 4:14–17).

The chief representative of the non-Messianic, collective interpretation was the 11th-century French-Jewish scholar, Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki (1040–1105), best known by his initials as Rashi. Rashi's views on Isaiah 53 were later supported by the famous

commentators and scholars Joseph Kimchi (1105–70) and his son, David (1160–1235), and later by the renowned Jewish scholar and diplomat, Don Isaac Abarbanel of Spain (1437–1508).

In time the non-Messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 practically became an official dogma among most Jewish people. Nevertheless, many learned rabbis have continued



to object strenuously to this interpretation as doing violence to the literal and obvious sense of Isaiah 53. Thus Rabbi Moshe Kohen ibn Crispin (13th century) complained bitterly that those who interpret Isaiah 53 as referring to Israel do violence to it and to its natural meaning, having “inclined after the stubbornness of their own hearts and their own opinion.” He continued:

I'm pleased to interpret the Parasha [passage] in accordance with the teaching of our rabbis, of the King Messiah . . . and adhere to the literal sense.

*Thus I shall be free from forced and farfetched interpretations of which others are guilty.*⁵

Similar opinions were voiced later by other prominent rabbinical authorities. However, the collective interpretation of Isaiah 53 remains the dominant one today among the majority of Jewish people. Strangely enough, many liberal Christian theologians, whom Old Testament scholar Franz Delitzsch once called “the uncircumcised rabbis,” have supported the Jewish position, sometimes out of deference to their Jewish friends or because it fell in line with their own liberal views, which had no place for the suffering Messiah predicted by the prophets.

JEWISH PROBLEMS WITH MESSIAH'S DEITY

Jewish arguments against the Christian interpretation of Isaiah 53 are generally based on a misinterpretation of Christian doctrine concerning the humanity and deity of Christ, that is, the doctrine of the Incarnation. The Jewish controversialists contrasted the infinite majesty and omnipotence of the eternal God with the physical

limitations of Jesus while He was on Earth in the form of a frail human being.

Here are some typical Jewish arguments against the divine nature of Christ:

1. Behold, my servant (52:13).

If Christ is God, how can He also be called a servant?

2. He shall be exalted (52:13).

How can it be said of God that He will be exalted (future tense)?

Is not God always exalted?

3. Smitten of God, and afflicted (53:4).

If Christ is God, how can He be smitten and afflicted by God?

4. And the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all (53:6).

If the Lord has laid on Him all our iniquity, then Jesus must be inferior to the Lord.

5. And he made his grave with the wicked (53:9).

How can God die and be buried?

6. And the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand (53:10).

If Jesus is God, how can it be said of Him, “the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand?”

These and many more such objections completely ignore the basic New Testament view of the Incarnation, expressed so poignantly by the apostle Paul:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery [literally, “a thing to be held on to”] to be equal with God, But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; And, being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:5–8).

By ignoring the New Testament doctrine of the Incarnation, Jewish scholars have sought to make the Christian interpretation of Isaiah 53 and other Messianic prophecies appear untenable or even nonsensical.

The famous Rabbi Manasseh ben Israel of Amsterdam (1604–57), who successfully persuaded British leader Oliver Cromwell to readmit Jewish people to England in 1655, wrote a paraphrase and a commentary

in which he presented the popular Jewish position on Isaiah 52:13—53:12, stating that the Gentiles will one day confess that it was the Jews who suffered innocently for the sins of the Gentile nations.

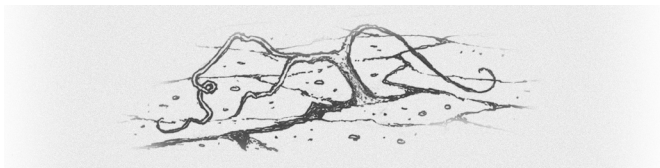
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 “HE HUMBL
 HIMSELF AND
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RABBI MANASSEH BEN ISRAEL'S PARAPHRASE OF ISAIAH 53:

52:13 Behold my servant Israel shall understand: he shall be exalted, extolled, and raised very high, at the coming of the Messiah.

52:14 As many of the nations were astonished at thee, O Israel, saying at the time of the captivity, Truly he is disfigured above all mankind in his countenance and form:

52:15 So at that time they shall speak of thy grandeur; even kings themselves shall shut their mouths in astonishment: for what They had never been told they shall see, and what they had not heard they shall understand.



53:1 Who would have believed (the nations will say) what we see, had it been related to them? And look upon what a vile nation the arm of the Lord has manifested itself.

53:2 He came up miraculously as a branch and a root out of a dry ground, for he had no form nor comeliness: we saw him, but so hideous, that it did not seem to us an appearance, for which we should envy him.

53:3 He was despised and rejected from the society of men, a man of sorrows, accustomed to suffer troubles; we hid our faces from him, he was despised and unesteemed among us.

53:4 But now we see that the sickness and troubles which we ought in reason to have suffered, he suffered and endured, and we thought that he was justly smitten by God and afflicted.

53:5 Whereas he suffered the sicknesses and sufferings which we deserved for our sins; he bore the chastisement

which our peace and felicity deserved; but his troubles appear to have been the cure of ourselves.

53:6 All we like sheep went astray: we followed every one his own sect, and so the Lord seems to have transferred on him the punishment of us all.

53:7 He was oppressed and afflicted: he was taken by us as a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before its shearers, depriving him of life and property: and he was dumb and opened not his mouth.

53:8 From prison and these torments he is now delivered: and who would have thought of this his happy age when he was banished from the holy land? Through the wickedness of my people (each nation will say) this blow came upon them.

53:9 He was buried with malefactors, and suffered various torments with the rich, without having committed crime or used deceit with his mouth.

53:10 But it was the Lord (the Prophet says) who wished to make him sick and afflict him,

■
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 DESPISED. . . AND
 UNESTEEMED
 AMONG US.”
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in order to purify him: if he offer his soul as an expiation he shall see seed, he shall prolong his days, and the will and determination of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

53:11 For the trouble which his soul suffered in captivity, he shall see good, shall be satisfied with days: by his wisdom my righteous servant Israel shall justify the many, and he will bear their burdens.

53:12 Therefore I will give him his share of spoil among the many and powerful of Gog and Magog, because he gave himself up unto death for the sanctification of my name; and was numbered with the transgressors; and he bore the offense of many, even praying for the very transgressors from whom he received injuries.⁶

This paraphrase is most interesting for it shows clearly the self-righteousness and self-infatuation of the rabbis who taught that Israel is completely righteous and suffers innocently merely because of Gentile wickedness. Rabbi Manasseh, commenting further on his paraphrase of Isaiah 53:6, explained:

But all we like sheep went astray, etc. That is, they [the Gentiles] will not only acknowledge the

*ill-treatment and bodily inflictions they had made Israel suffer, but at the same time their errors, attributing their wickedness thereto; for many will say, we all (Ishmaelites and Edumeans), [in rabbinical parlance, they are the Mahomedans and the Christians] like sheep went astray, each in his own way followed a new sect; just as the prophet Jeremiah says (16:19). **And the Lord made to fall on him, [on Israel] the wickedness of us all.** That is, we [the Gentiles] erred, they followed the truth; consequently they suffered the punishments, which we deserved. We deprived them of their property as tribute, and afflicted their bodies with various kinds of torture, **yet he opened not his mouth,** etc. The experience of this is seen every day, particularly in the cruelties of the Inquisition, and the false testimony raised against them to take their wool and rob them of their property.⁷*

It would be difficult to conceive of a greater misinterpretation of the text or distortion of the obvious sense of the disputed passage.

THE DIVISION OF ISAIAH 52:13—53:12

Having considered the differing Jewish and Christian interpretations of Isaiah 53, we shall now translate the Hebrew text and seek to interpret its natural and obvious sense.

The passage may be divided into five sections, each consisting of three verses.

Section One: Isaiah 52:13–15

Jehovah introduces His faithful servant and announces that he will accomplish the divine purpose and shall, in the future, be highly exalted.

Section Two: Isaiah 53:1–3

Penitent Israel's confession.

Section Three: Isaiah 53:4–6

Jehovah's servant suffers for the sins of his people.

Section Four: Isaiah 53:7–9

Although without sin, the servant submits himself to humiliation, suffering, and death without opening his mouth.

Section Five: Isaiah 53:10–12

The servant's offering was God-ordained in order to bring forgiveness and redemption to many. Yet the servant shall rise from the dead, have a lasting following, and rejoice in the results of his completed work.

The heart of the issue in this hotly contested passage is the question of whether the prophet considered Israel to be Jehovah's servant, as most modern Jews and liberal Christians do, or whether the

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prophet gave us a word portrait of a God-appointed individual who suffers innocently for the sins of his people, just as the oldest Jewish tradition and the early church have always maintained.

It is obvious that only the second position is consistent with the common-sense meaning of the text. Repeatedly, the prophet refers to Jehovah's servant in the singular: "he," "him," "his," or "thee." Furthermore, the prophet's portrait of the servant is utterly irreconcilable with Isaiah's frequently expressed scathing opinions about Israel.

Whereas Israel is castigated as a blind and disobedient servant (Isa. 24:18–20) who refuses to obey the Law (Isa. 42:24), the servant of the Lord is presented as humble and silent under extreme suffering and torture (Isa. 53:7). The Jewish people have always protested loudly against their tormentors. Whatever Israel's virtues may be, silence under suffering was never one of them.

We shall see in greater detail the essential differences between Israel as a servant and the suffering servant of God—the Messiah of Isaiah 53.

It is clear that in this great prophecy, Israel is not the innocent sufferer for the redemption of the nations but is herself the object of salvation through God's servant. This remarkable chapter compels us to reflect on the life and destiny of Jesus in the light of the New Testament. However, as soon as we try to force it to fit Israel as a people, the comparison falls apart.

Because of the striking parallel between the suffering Messiah of this amazing prophecy and the prophecy's remarkable fulfillment in the person of Jesus, Isaiah 53

has been excluded from the Sabbath readings of the Prophets (the Haftorah) in the synagogue. Some have called Isaiah 53 “the secret chapter” or “the guilty conscience of the synagogue.”

The 13th-century rabbinical scholar, Rabbi Moshe Kohen ibn Crispin, probably most clearly enunciated the traditional Messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53:

This prophecy was delivered by Isaiah at the divine command for the purpose of making known to us something about the nature of the future Messiah, who is to come and deliver Israel . . . in order that if any one should arise claiming to be himself the Messiah, we may reflect, and look to see whether we can observe in him any resemblance to the traits described here: if there is any such resemblance, then we may believe that he is the Messiah our righteousness; but if not, we cannot do so.⁸

