

Chapter 5: The “Suffering Servant” of Isaiah 53

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Is Isaiah 53 the forgotten Haftorah or the forbidden chapter as asserted by Christian missionaries? The missionary claim is that this chapter has been left out of the Haftorah cycle because the “rabbis” knew that if we read this chapter, we would know that Jesus is the Jewish messiah. In order for this claim to be true, the custom of reading the Haftorah or prophets in the Synagogue on Shabbat would have to have been established after Jesus’ death, to intentionally counteract the Christian claims. However, we know that the custom of reading the Haftorah began many years before Jesus.

Additionally, in the New Testament book of Acts, chapter 13, we read of an occasion where Paul is in the Synagogue on Shabbat.

Acts 13:15

After the reading of the Law and the Prophets the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it."

This tells us that both the Torah and the Haftorah were being read in the synagogue during the time of Paul, which was very shortly after the death of Jesus.

Furthermore, the question must be asked, if Isaiah 53 is about the coming messiah, and was understood at the time of Jesus to be messianic, then his disciples should have understood the passage as messianic and recognized Jesus as the fulfillment of such. Does the New Testament give us this impression? In Matthew chapter 16, Jesus and Peter are having a conversation and Jesus asks Peter who he thinks Jesus is. Peter answers that he believes Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus then praises Peter's astuteness and, according to verse 21, goes on to explain about what is to happen to him.

Matthew 16:15-17

(15) He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

(16) Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

(17) And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

...

(21) From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.

(22) Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid *it*, Lord! This shall never happen to you. "

After Jesus explains to Peter that he must suffer and die and be resurrected on the third day, what is Peter's response? Does Peter recognize that Jesus is going to fulfill the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53?

Not only did Peter not understand Jesus' words and experiences to be in fulfillment of Isaiah 53, but so foreign to the understanding of any of the messianic prophecies is this concept that Peter responds adamantly, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to you."

The Jewish Prophets wrote hundreds of years before the time of the second Temple. Not only was the concept of the messiah one that all Jews of Jesus' time were familiar with, but there was a messianic fervency. So, clearly, when Peter said that Jesus was the messiah, he had a concept of who and what the messiah was and he would have been familiar with the most important passages in the bible regarding the messiah. That being the case, had the most important passages regarding the messiah stated that the messiah was going to come and die for the sins of the world, Peter would have been expecting what Jesus was telling him, he would have understood this to be part of the picture.

And yet, when Jesus says, "I'm supposed to die, you know, and go to Jerusalem and suffer and be killed and then come back on the third day," Peter did not say, "Oh, great! You must be the person Isaiah spoke about!" Peter took him and began to rebuke him saying "Be it far from you Lord, this shall not be unto you." He says, "God forbid! That can't happen to you!" Peter never expected the Messiah to be tortured and killed. Let's Look at Mark, chapter 9.

Mark 9:31-32

(31) For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later."

(32) But they did not understand *this* statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.

There never was such a concept of this kind of Messiah. And that is why his disciples and are a bit surprised to hear this. Nobody ever understood Isaiah 53 to be predicting the death of the Messiah.

Regarding its absence in the Haftorah reading cycle, the truth is, Isaiah 53 was not chosen as a Haftorah reading because it does not have any tangible connection with any of the Torah portions. That's it, it's really that simple. There is no rabbinic conspiracy, nothing forbidden; nothing to hide.

So, since we have nothing to hide, using the Christian translation, let's look at the Christian claim that Jesus is the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. Even though there is good reason to understand that Isaiah 53 is not about the messiah at all, we'll ignore that for now. The one question we will examine here, is, "does Jesus fit the picture of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53?" Is he or isn't he, that is the question.

Isaiah 52:13-15

(13) Behold, My servant shall deal prudently; he shall be exalted and extolled and be very high.

(14) Just as many were astonished at you, so his visage was marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men;

(15) So shall he sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths at him; for what had not been told them they shall see, and what they had not heard they shall consider.

Isaiah 53:1-12

(1) Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

(2) For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

(3) He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from him; he was despised, and we did not esteem him.

(4) Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

(5) But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed.

(6) All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

(7) He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

(8) He was taken from prison and from judgment, and who will declare his generation? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgressions of My people he was stricken.

(9) And they made his grave with the wicked— but with the rich at his death, because he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

(10) Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he has put him to grief. When you make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

(11) He shall see the labor of his soul, and be satisfied. By his knowledge my righteous servant shall justify many, for he shall bear their iniquities.

(12) Therefore I will 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 he was numbered with the transgressors, and he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

After reading through this passage, we have a couple of questions begging to be asked. The first question is, “who is this passage talking about?” The second question is, “Since Christians say it is Jesus, does he actually fit the description?”

Isaiah 53 is considered by many missionaries to be the number one proof for Jesus as the messiah. Most missionaries believe that if they can get a Jewish person to read Isaiah 53 with them, the Jewish person will most certainly see that it’s about Jesus and want to become a Christian. To the missionary, this verse is that powerful, and it is that simple.

But if it were that simple, why didn’t Jesus’ disciples understand that the things he was telling them would happen was in fulfillment of this passage? Even more disturbing, though, is why Origen, one of the most distinguished of the early fathers of the Christian Church, never brings this up as a proof? Perhaps it is because that’s not what Isaiah 53 is about.

First, we are going to see if Jesus fits the description, and then we will look at who else this passage could possibly be talking about.

Despised, rejected and forsaken?

Isaiah 53:2-3

(2) For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

(3) He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from him; he was despised, and we did not esteem him.

This is the standard Christian translation of the passage. When we examine the Hebrew text, we find that there is a more correct translation. Regardless of which translation is used, it becomes clear very quickly that Jesus did not fit this picture.

ויעל כיונק לפניו וכשרש מארץ ציה לא־תאר לו ולא הדר ונראה ולא־מראה ונחמדהו:
נבזה וחדל אישים איש מכאבות וידוע חלי וכמסתר פנים ממנו נבזה ולא חשבנהו:

For he grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; he has no stately form or majesty that we should look upon him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of pains and acquainted with disease; and like one from whom men hide their face **He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.**

Isaiah 53:2-3 describes someone who is not strong, who has nothing particularly attractive about him physically. In addition, he was despised, that means hated. The implication here is this person is someone people do not want to have anything to do with. This is someone that no one was interested in being around, someone who people didn't even notice.

Is this a description of Jesus? When we read these verses, we can conjure up a picture in our head of poor, lonely, Jesus, hanging on the cross, beaten. When challenged with this question, missionaries will often point to the description of the final moments before Jesus' death. But Isaiah is describing someone for whom rejection was a way of life, not someone who suffered rejection for only a couple of hours—many people throughout history have experienced that to some degree, and no one is claiming that they are this servant.

In order to get a better picture of whether or not this passage is describing Jesus, let's look at a few verses from the New Testament that tell us a little about his life.

Mark 3:7-9

Jesus withdrew to the sea with His disciples; and **a great multitude from Galilee followed**; and *also* from Judea, (8) and from Jerusalem, and from Idumea, and beyond the Jordan, and the vicinity of Tyre and Sidon, a great number of people heard of all that He was doing and came to Him. (9) And He told His disciples that a boat should stand ready for Him **because of the crowd**, so that they would not crowd Him.

Luke 4:14-15

And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about Him spread through all the surrounding district. (15) And He began teaching in their synagogues and **was praised by all**.

Luke 2:52

And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature (helikia – physical growth), and in favor with God and man.

According to the New Testament, Jesus was a man who was so immensely popular that people came from "beyond the Jordan" to hear what he had to say. In fact, on occasion, he had to get in a boat and sail into the water so that he could speak without being overrun by the crowds. According to Luke, he was so popular that he spoke and taught in the synagogue and was "praised by all". And the passage in Luke 2:52 indicates that he was physically strong and well respected by people. Does that sound like the person the Prophet Isaiah is describing?

Did Jesus have any enemies? Of course he did. According to the New Testament, there were some people in leadership among the Jewish people who didn't like his radical ideas and messianic claims. But, who among us doesn't have some enemies, is this what the Prophet is describing?

Did not open his mouth?

Isaiah 53:7

He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet He did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so he did not open his mouth.

In verse 7 of this chapter, Isaiah is describing this servant, who, although he suffered greatly, he did not open his mouth. In front of those who would destroy him, it says, he did not open his mouth. Why is this phrase listed twice in the same verse? Did Jesus go quietly to his death, without objecting, without trying to get out of it? Let's see what the New Testament says about this.

John 18:36

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm."

In John chapter 18, we find an odd story. Assuming for a minute that the details are true, Jesus has just been arrested in the middle of the night and taken to the high priest's court, after which he is delivered into the hands of Pilate, who is the Roman ruler of Jerusalem at the time. When we get to verse 36, Pilate has just asked Jesus if he is King of the Jews. Obviously, the one thing that the Roman Ruler does not want is someone who is about to attempt an overthrow of the government. In essence, Jesus is being held for sedition. So, does Jesus keep silent in the face of his accuser or does he defend himself? Well, in verse 36, Jesus tells Pilate that yes, indeed, he is a king, but that his kingdom is not physical, it's spiritual, so Rome has nothing to worry about. Silent he is not.

Matthew 26:39

And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will."

Looking at Matthew, chapter 26, we have yet an even stranger story. For here we see Jesus, who not only knows he is dying to save the world, but according to the writers of the New Testament, he also knew he was divine. Yet, just before he goes to his death, he asks G-d to stop it from happening. Silent?

Matthew 27:46

(46) About the ninth hour Jesus cried out **with a loud voice, saying**, "ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" that is, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?"

Lastly, when we look at Matthew, chapter 27, we see Jesus, in pain and agony, dying on the cross. He knows he is about to die. Is he silent? Does he pray the Shema? No, he cries out with a loud voice asking G-d why He has forsaken him. "Lama Sabachthani" is a corruption of the Hebrew, "lama azavtani?" A study of the final period of Jesus' life as documented in the New Testament reveals that there are many other examples of how Jesus opened his mouth.

Rabbi Akiva

The story of Rabbi Akiva is one that touches the hearts of the Jewish people. Most traditional Jews are familiar with his story.

Rabbi Akiva was arrested by the Romans and was about to be taken out for execution. According to the Talmud, it was the hour for the recital of the shema. The story is told that Rabbi Akiva was tortured to death by having his flesh scraped off with iron combs. He accepted upon himself the kingship of heaven. So as he was being tortured to death he was saying the shema, "Hear O Israel, the Lord, our God, the Lord is One."

At this point, his disciples said to him, "Our teacher, even to this point. You're going to be this religious that you are going to say the shema while they're torturing you to death?" He said to them, "All my days I have been troubled by the verse that 'you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul'." He said, "I never understood that verse, which I interpret to mean even if he takes your soul. You should love God even if God takes your soul. I said, 'When will I ever have the opportunity of fulfilling this - of actually worshipping God and praising God as He is taking my life from me?' Now that I have the opportunity, should I not fulfill it?"

So he went to his death saying the shema, reciting his love of God. Throughout Jewish history we have seen people going to their death, the Jews going to the concentration camps, saying the shema, as they went to the gas chambers, singing that they believed with perfect faith that God will redeem them. Not quite so with Jesus. The picture we have here is someone who doesn't even do what the simplest of Jews would do. This is the man who was supposed to be God himself - or the son of God. And yet he protests before the crucifixion, he cries out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That is not the kind of thing that Rabbi Akiva did.

He had done no violence?

Isaiah 53:9

They made His grave with the wicked, and his tomb with the rich, although He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

Luke 8:27-33

And when He came out onto the land, He was met by a man from the city who was possessed with demons... Seeing Jesus, he cried out and fell before Him... They [the demons] were imploring Him not to command them to go away into the abyss. Now there was a herd of many swine feeding there on the mountain; and the demons implored Him to permit them to enter the swine. And He gave them permission. And the demons came out of the man and entered the swine; and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

The story is told in Luke, chapter 8, of a demon possessed man who approached Jesus, and Jesus commanded the demons to come out of the man. An act of mercy, to be sure, and one we might expect from someone claiming to be the messiah. But what happens as a result of this exorcism is not only strange and unnecessary, but might even be considered an act of violence.

As Jesus is about to cast out the demons, they beg him to let them enter a herd of swine that were feeding nearby. So in an inexplicable act of mercy towards the demons and with no regard for the animals, Jesus acquiesces and casts the demons into the herd of swine causing the animals to plunge headlong into a river

and drown. The whole herd of pigs was killed unnecessarily. This is not only inhumane, but goes against the Torah principle of being kind to animals. Although we could spend a lot of time analyzing why he did it, the fact remains that this was for all intents and purposes, an act of violence.

Matthew 21:17-20

(17) And He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, and spent the night there.

(18) Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry.

(19) Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." And at once the fig tree withered.

(20) Seeing this, the disciples were amazed and asked, "How did the fig tree wither all at once?"

Mark 11:12-14

(12) On the next day, when they had left Bethany, He became hungry.

(13) Seeing at a distance a fig tree in leaf, He went *to see* if perhaps He would find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.

(14) He said to it, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" And His disciples were listening.

In Matthew 21 and Mark 11, we have an interesting story. After having entered Jerusalem and then traveled back to Bethany to get his disciples, Jesus finds himself hungry. According to the narrative, Jesus comes upon a fig tree that had leaves on it, but no fruit. In Mark we are told that this was because it was not yet the season for figs. Obviously disappointed, and a little perturbed, Jesus curses the fig tree. In Matthew we are told that the fig tree withered at once. Jesus, in his anger committed an act of violence, in direct opposition to a principle laid down in Torah.

The Hebrew Scriptures strongly warn us not to destroy fruit trees, and in Deuteronomy 20:20, we are told that even when we are laying siege to a city, we are not permitted to cut down the fruit trees.

So then, the question begs to be asked, why did Jesus destroy the fig tree? If it was because he needed to prove he was divine and had power over trees, wouldn't it have made more sense for him to bless it, that it would be fruitful, or even better yet, have performed a miracle and had it produce fruit before their very eyes, like when God caused Aaron's staff to bloom and bear fruit?

Jesus' violent streak doesn't end there.

Matthew 10:34-35

(34) "Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.

(35) "For I came to SET A MAN AGAINST HIS FATHER, AND A DAUGHTER AGAINST HER MOTHER, AND A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW AGAINST HER MOTHER-IN-LAW;

Whereas in this passage, Jesus' words can be understood as symbolic, in Luke 22:36-38, Jesus tells his disciples to purchase a real sword:

Luke 22:36, 38

(36) And He said to them, "But now, whoever has a money belt is to take it along, likewise also a bag, and whoever has no sword is to sell his coat and buy one.

(38) They said, "Lord, look, here are two swords." And He said to them, "It is enough."

So ready to fight, that when the Roman soldiers came to take him away, one of Jesus' disciples cut off the ear of the High Priest's servant. Clearly his disciple understood his command to purchase swords as indicating that they were to use them.

Lastly, we come to what many may see as Jesus' most violent episode recorded in the New Testament. Sometime after Jesus supposedly performs his first miracle by turning water into wine at a wedding in the city of Cana, he goes to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, and according to the book of John, finds things as they ought not to be.

John 2:13-15

(13) The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

(14) And He found in the temple those who were selling oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables.

(15) And He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables;

Disregarding the fact that there is serious reason to doubt the veracity of this account based on historical evidence, taking the passage at face value, it would appear that Jesus got angry at what he saw going on in the Temple. Letting his anger get the best of him, he made a whip and started to hit people, driving the money changers and the animals out of the Temple.

Now, it might be said that Jesus was justified in what he did, since he saw things were not as they should have been, this is what is called righteous indignation. Even if we give him that, can it truly be said that he "had done no violence"? Does Jesus really fit the picture being painted by Isaiah in chapter 53? An honest evaluation reveals that Jesus is certainly does not fit the picture.

No Deceit in his mouth?

Isaiah 53:9

They made His grave with the wicked, and his tomb with the rich, although He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth.

The last part of verse 9 says that there was not any deceit in his mouth. Since this phrase is fairly self-explanatory, let's jump right into a look at Jesus.

In John chapter 18, we have the story of Jesus' arrest. Now we will ignore the glaring inconsistencies of the story and forge ahead to the part where Jesus is standing before the High Priest, or perhaps the High Priest's father-in-Law, Annas (this is one major problem with the story). Here, Jesus is asked about his disciples and his teachings and Jesus responds in verse 20:

John 18:20

Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret.

Yet, the Gospel accounts contradict this statement.

Mark 4:10-12

(10) As soon as He was alone, His followers, along with the twelve, *began* asking Him *about* the parables.

(11) And He was saying to them, "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables,
(12) so that WHILE SEEING, THEY MAY SEE AND NOT PERCEIVE, AND WHILE HEARING, THEY MAY HEAR AND NOT UNDERSTAND, OTHERWISE THEY MIGHT RETURN AND BE FORGIVEN."

Here, in Mark chapter four, Jesus explains to his disciples that he speaks in parables so that those who are "outside" won't understand and receive forgiveness. Jesus is purposely being confusing, yet he said to the Romans that he never spoke in secret. And in Matthew 16, Jesus outright tells his disciples not to tell anyone that he is the messiah.

Matthew 16:20

Then He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ.

Luke 8:52-56

(52) Now they were all weeping and lamenting for her; but He said, "Stop weeping, for she has not died, but is asleep."

(53) And they began laughing at Him, knowing that she had died.

(54) He, however, took her by the hand and called, saying, "Child, arise!"

(55) And her spirit returned, and she got up immediately; and He gave orders for *something* to be given her to eat.

(56) Her parents were amazed; but He instructed them to tell no one what had happened.

In Luke chapter 8 we have the story of Jesus resurrecting the daughter of Jairus, who was an official of the synagogue. Jairus had come to Jesus to ask him to come heal his daughter, who had been ill. While Jairus was with Jesus, news came that his daughter had died. After Jesus came to the house and raised the girl from the dead, he told the parents not to tell anyone what he had done.

Now, in all fairness, perhaps Jesus had good reason for instructing the girl's parents not to say anything. Perhaps it was to protect Jairus. Whatever the reason, justified deceit is still deceit, and Isaiah says that the servant has no deceit in his mouth. Again, Jesus doesn't fit the picture.

See his offspring?

Isaiah 53:10

But the Lord was pleased to crush him, putting him to grief; if he would render himself *as* a guilt offering, he will see his offspring, he will prolong his days, and the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

The word translated here as offspring is the Hebrew word זרע (zera) and is only used in the bible to refer to physical offspring. When the Hebrew Scriptures are using the term children figuratively, they use the word בנים (banim). Jesus never had any physical children, according to the New Testament and Christian tradition. Any spiritual descendants he may have had could not fulfill this prophecy as they would be זרעים (zeraim) and not בנים (banim).

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 14:1

You are the sons of the Lord your God...

בנים אתם לה' אלקיכם

Isaiah uses an unmistakably clear word. Isaiah uses the word זרע (zera). Zera is the Hebrew word for seed and is the biblical word for sperm as well. The Bible has another word that is used for spiritual or figurative children, and that word is simple "children" and not "seed". So whenever the Bible wants to speak about the children of God, it never speaks about the seed of God, but it speaks about the sons or daughters of God. For example, here in Deuteronomy, chapter fourteen.

Bereshit (Genesis) 15:2-4

(2) Abram said, "O Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the **heir** (בן) of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"

(3) And Abram said, "Since You have given no **offspring** (זרע) to me, one born in my house is my **heir** (בן)."

(4) Then behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir."

Abraham says that the only "child" that I have is Eliezer the Damascene, but it refers to Eliezer as "ben", not as his zera, as his seed. This is because clearly, Eliezer is not from his family, but he might be considered an offspring, so he is called a "ben". Then Abram said, "To me you have given no seed [no zera]. And you see, God, that the son of my house is my heir." And here the word is not zera, because it is speaking about Eliezer who is simply a disciple or a child in a figurative sense.

Bereshit (Genesis) 15:4

Then behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir."

It will not be a figurative disciple or offspring; it will be a physical person that comes from within you, is what God is telling Abraham here. And finally, if we actually look at a different verse in Isaiah, we see that when God speaks about His Children, he uses, "My banim" because God does not have seed.

Isaiah 45:11

Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker: "Ask Me about the things to come concerning My **sons** (בנים), and you shall commit to Me the work of My hands.

In clear contrast to the above verse, Isaiah, referring to the physical descendants of Jacob, uses the word זרע (zera).

Isaiah 45:19

I have not spoken in secret, in some dark land; I did not say to the **offspring** (זרע) of Jacob, 'Seek Me in a waste place'; I, the Lord, speak righteousness, declaring things that are upright.

Prolong his days?

Isaiah 53:10

But the Lord was pleased to crush him, putting him to grief; If he would render himself *as* a guilt offering, He will see his offspring, He will prolong his days, and the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

According to the New Testament, Jesus was 33 years old when he died. Even with an average lifespan of 70 years, 33 could not be considered a long life. If Jesus were an ordinary mortal, then he did not prolong his days. Well, certainly when it comes to prolonging his days, Jesus loses. And if Jesus was not a mortal human being, if he was an eternal, mighty god, then it is irrelevant to talk about prolonging his days. You cannot prolong “eternal”. So the idea of prolonging the days of Jesus does not work out.

Conclusion

Although Isaiah 53 can be understood as referring to someone other than the messiah, for the sake of this exercise, we have assumed the messianic understanding. Even with this premise, a close examination renders Jesus inadequate on almost every point. No matter who we conclude that Isaiah 53 is talking about, the suffering servant of this chapter cannot be Jesus.

If not Jesus, then who?

Understanding that Isaiah 53 is not about Jesus is a good start, but the true believer would be forced to ask the question, “Well, if it’s not about Jesus, who is it about?” Not only is this a valid question from the missionary’s perspective, it is the essential question for us as Jews. What does this chapter mean? Who could it be talking about? What is really going on here in Isaiah?

Note that one of the things that we learned in the section on proof-texting was the importance of context. Context is crucial. Missionaries often say to Jewish people, “Have you ever read Isaiah fifty-three?” But Isaiah doesn’t start at chapter 53, it starts at Chapter 1. And even if you take into consideration that Isaiah isn’t actually one book but a group of books, the last book, the one containing chapter 53, begins with Chapter 40. This last book has a very consistent theme that will aid us in our quest to figure out what chapter 53 is trying to say to us.

Taking Isaiah 53 in the context of what we have now explored about what the Jewish bible says concerning the messiah and atonement, we see that the Christian reading of Isaiah 53 was not consistent with the rest of the Bible. There is no corroboration in the rest of the Bible that the Messiah comes to die and atone for the sins of the world.

When we read this passage from the Jewish point of view, we need to keep these concepts in mind. Is the Jewish interpretation one that is borne out by corroborative passages in the rest of the Bible? That will be an important thing to consider.

Now we will look at the key to understanding this chapter in Isaiah. Once we have this key, the entire chapter makes sense. But without this key this chapter can be very difficult. The key is, “Who is speaking.” That’s it. Once we know that, everything else falls into place. Isaiah, chapter fifty-two, verse thirteen:

Isaiah 52:13

Behold, My servant will prosper, he will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.

Who is speaking here in verse 13? Clearly the speaker is God and He's talking about His servant, whom he is going to prosper and exalt.

Isaiah 52:14-15

(14) Just as many were astonished at you, so his appearance was marred more than any man and his form more than the sons of men.

(15) Thus he will startle many nations, kings will shut their mouths on account of him; for what had not been told them they will see, and what they had not heard they will understand.

In verses 14 and 15, God is still speaking. In verse 15 God says that that when the servant is exalted – this servant who appears marred and disfigured, whom they thought was forsaken – will so shock the nations that they are going to be speechless. Not only are they going to be speechless, but they are going to see that everything is actually the opposite of how they had understood it to be. What they had been told about the servant, what they had heard, will all of a sudden be undone and they will be startled at the revelation.

Moving on to chapter 53, we read:

Isaiah 53:1

Who would have believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

Now, who is speaking here? Clearly, this is no longer God speaking about his servant, but rather, it is a group of people. It is the Kings, who in verse 15 will be shocked into silence upon seeing that things are not as they thought they were. Now, the Kings are declaring their shock – who would have believed what we are telling you? This is clear from the fact that 53:1 follows 52:15.

By understanding that it is the nations, or the Kings of the nations from 52:15 who are speaking in 53:1, we can easily see what is going on here.

Going back to 52:13, Isaiah tells us that God says that His servant will be exalted and lifted up very high. God tells us that when the servant is exalted and lifted up, the world is going to be shocked.

Now, in chapter fifty-three, God is not speaking anymore. The people that are speaking are the people who have just been freaked out. And what do they say as an expression of this? They say, "Who would have believed what we are telling you (this servant that we thought was done for is now being exalted)?"

Why would the Kings of the nations be speechless upon seeing the servant exalted? Perhaps it is because the nations thought they understood why the servant had been despised and rejected (53:3), they thought they knew why he was "marred" more than anyone else (52:14). In the end however, they will have a new understanding of what had happened and "They will shut their mouths." In other words, they are going to be speechless. What is there to say? When this servant is exalted, they will be left thinking, "Oh, my God." Isaiah fifty-three is a speech that is being made after the exaltation of the servant.

Throughout history, if you were to ask Christians why the Jews have been suffering for the past two thousand years, the most common response would be that we (the Jews) are basically suffering because we rejected the Messiah. That has been the basic Christian understanding of Jewish suffering. And most of these Christians assume that at the second coming, when Jesus comes, and everyone sees his pierced hands and feet, the Jews are going to say, "Hey. We made a big mistake two thousand years ago."

Alternatively, imagine that in the near future the Messiah comes, and it is not Jesus, why did Jews suffer for the past two thousand years? The nations will understand that it is not because the Jews were sinful but because the nations were sinful. They will realize that they persecuted them inappropriately. The nations persecuted the Jews because they rejected the Messiah, but then they will understand that the Jews were right for rejecting Jesus. He was not the Messiah.

Isaiah 52:13

Behold, My servant will prosper, he will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.

When we look at verse 13, we might begin by asking what it means that the servant is going to be high and lifted up. But the truth is, that first we are confronted with that ever-plaguing question of who the servant is. If we were to start reading from Isaiah 53, or even 52:13, we would have a problem because the text here doesn't tell us who the servant is. It's almost as if the writer is assuming that, having read the previous 52 chapters, (or at least the previous 12) we already know who the servant is.

Why would Isaiah assume that we already know who the servant is? Because he's already told us dozens of times in the preceding chapters. For the reader who has been reading the book of Isaiah consecutively, which is the way normal people read a book. Let's face it, who buys a novel and opens it to page 75 and starts reading from there? So, for the reader who has been reading the book as it was written to be read, from the beginning, it is very clear who the servant of God is. So, who does Isaiah tell us is the servant of God?

Isaiah 41:8-9

(8) "But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham My friend,
(9) You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called from its remotest parts and said to you, 'You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you.

Remember that this last book of Isaiah starts at chapter 40. It's interesting that the theme of the Servant is woven pretty much throughout the book and begins pretty close to the beginning. Here we have it in chapter 41. Who is God's servant? Isaiah is very clear that Israel, also called Jacob, is God's servant. It is also clear from verse 9 that this is referring to the Nation of Israel, and not just the individual Jacob. Just to be sure, let's look other verses from Isaiah that confirm this.

Isaiah 44:1-2, 21

(1) "But now listen, O Jacob, My servant, and Israel, whom I have chosen:
(2) Thus says the Lord who made you and formed you from the womb, who will help you, 'Do not fear, O Jacob My servant; and you Jeshurun whom I have chosen.

(21) "Remember these things, O Jacob, And Israel, for you are My servant; I have formed you, you are My servant, O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me.

Isaiah 45:4

For the sake of Jacob My servant, and Israel My chosen one, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor though you have not known Me.

Isaiah 48:20

Go forth from Babylon! Flee from the Chaldeans! Declare with the sound of joyful shouting, proclaim this, send it out to the end of the earth; say, "The Lord has redeemed His servant Jacob."

Isaiah 49:3

He said to Me, "You are My Servant, Israel, In Whom I will show My glory."

At this point, anyone reading the book of Isaiah consecutively comes to chapter 52 with a very clear understanding of who the servant of God is. Based on what we read in the previous chapters, one can have no understanding other than that the servant of God is Israel. There is no reason to assume that the servant in chapter 52 is someone different from the servant in chapter 41, 44, 45, 48 and 49. In fact, you would really have to do some gymnastics in order to prove that the servant is someone other than Israel.

And yet, looking at Isaiah 52:14-15, there is room for confusion. Why? Because it seems like in verse 14 the Prophet is speaking to one group of people ("you") about someone else, "My Servant". The confusion created here can also be found again in 53:11, where the servant "justifies" the "many". In the second verse, the many can be understood to be any group of people and it could be said that the servant's suffering somehow makes an atonement for all of mankind, including the Gentiles, that only in G-d's mercy and because of the suffering of the servant, he didn't destroy the entire world again as he did in Noah's time. But in 52:13, it seems to be saying the "you" is the Jewish people and the servant is one particular Jewish person. At first glance this might seem to support the idea that the servant is a single savior of some sort, however, Rashi explains that the servant is the righteous remnant of Israel, which will be addressed in a few moments when we talk about the use of the singular for the servant.

Okay, so the servant is Israel. But when we thought that the servant was Jesus, we saw that he didn't measure up. How does Israel measure up as the servant in Isaiah 53?

The Servant Will Prosper

Isaiah 52:13

Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.

Isaiah 52:13 says that the servant will prosper in the end times. Do we have any other passages that tell us that Israel will prosper in the end times?

Isaiah 54:17

"No weapon that is formed against you will prosper; and every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their vindication is from Me," declares the Lord.

Isaiah 60:1-3

- (1) Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
- (2) For behold, darkness will cover the earth and deep darkness the peoples; but the Lord will rise upon you and His glory will appear upon you.
- (3) Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.

Isaiah 60:14-15

(14) "The sons of those who afflicted you will come bowing to you, and all those who despised you will bow themselves at the soles of your feet; and they will call you the city of the Lord, The Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

(15) "Whereas you have been forsaken and hated with no one passing through, I will make you an everlasting pride, a joy from generation to generation.

Isaiah 61:6-7

(6) But you will be called the priests of the Lord; you will be spoken of as ministers of our God. You will eat the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast.

(7) Instead of your shame you will have a double portion, and instead of humiliation they will shout for joy over their portion. Therefore they will possess a double portion in their land, everlasting joy will be theirs.

Isaiah 62:2-3

(2) The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; and you will be called by a new name which the mouth of the Lord will designate.

(3) You will also be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

We have seen only a few of the hundreds of references that paint this picture of the Jewish people one day being exalted in the earth.

Israel referred to in the Singular

Many missionaries will agree that there is this theme that Israel, as a servant of God, will one day be exalted. However, they will still object to the idea that the servant of Isaiah 53 is Israel on the basis that the servant, in Isaiah 53 is repeatedly referred to in the singular and not in the plural. It says, He will be despised, and He will be rejected. So, reasons the missionary, if Isaiah is speaking about a single person, how can he be referring to the entire nation of Israel? This is a very legitimate objection if one is not familiar with the language of the Hebrew bible. Anyone familiar with the Hebrew bible knows that the bible consistently refers to the Jewish people as if speaking about a singular individual.

Isaiah 43:10

"You are My witnesses," declares the Lord, "and My servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe Me and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me."

It is not at all uncommon to see both singular and plural used in the same verse in the bible. In fact, we have even seen G-d refer to himself in both first and third person in the same verse. In this case, God refers to the servant in both the singular and plural – the witnesses are (is) the servant. So the plural is described as a singular.

Exodus 4:22

Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, "Israel is My son, My firstborn."

Hosea 11:1

When Israel was a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.

Hosea 8:3

Israel has rejected the good; the enemy will pursue him.

Based on these verses, and many other similar ones, one cannot reject Israel as the servant based on the use of the singular, "he". It is clear that throughout the Jewish bible, God refers to Israel the nation, not only in terms of a singular male, but also occasionally in terms of a female.

The Arm of the Lord Revealed

Isaiah 53:1

Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

Here in verse 1, the phrase, "the arm of the Lord" is used. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, we see this phrase used to refer specifically to Israel's redemption from her enemies.

Shemot (Exodus) 6:6

Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 7:19

the great trials which your eyes saw and the signs and the wonders and the mighty hand and the outstretched arm by which the Lord your God brought you out. So shall the Lord your God do to all the peoples of whom you are afraid.

Isaiah 62:8

The Lord has sworn by His right hand and by His strong arm, "I will never again give your grain as food for your enemies; nor will foreigners drink your new wine for which you have labored."

Isaiah 63:12

Who caused His glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for Himself an everlasting name,

Shemot (Exodus) 3:20

"So I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all My miracles which I shall do in the midst of it; and after that he will let you go.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 4:34

"Or has God tried to go to take for himself a nation from within *another* nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?

Tehillim (Psalms) 89:10

You Yourself crushed Rahab like one who is slain; You scattered Your enemies with Your mighty arm.

Isaiah 52:9-10

(9) Break forth, shout joyfully together, you waste places of Jerusalem; For the Lord has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem.

(10) The Lord has bared His holy arm in the sight of all the nations, that all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God.

So, going back to verse 1, the nations are explaining why they are shocked, they are saying, “who would have believed it?” Believed what? The arm of the Lord has been revealed to them – that is, that they are finally seeing the salvation of Israel – something they never expected based on the description of the servant, Israel, which follows.

No stately form or appearance

Isaiah 53:2

For he grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He has no stately form or majesty That we should look upon him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to him.

In verse 2, Isaiah tells us that the servant grows up before God as a tender shoot, like a root out of parched ground. What are the qualities of a plant which grows up out of parched ground? So much energy is expended on just breaking through the surface – on survival, that the plant doesn’t waste energy with extra foliage or branches. It is usually spindly and not particularly attractive since it has been starved. The nation of Israel grew from infancy into a nation constantly beset by the other nations. Even from the very beginning, the surrounding nations were more interested in war than peace, and as a result regarded the fledgling nation of Israel as something unattractive, and undesirable.

When someone dislikes another for any reason, it tends to color their opinion about every aspect of that person, including their physical appearance. For example, a person who you like, you tend to consider much more physically attractive than you would if you didn’t like that person. We already saw that the New Testament gives us no reason to assume that Jesus was unattractive physically.

However, the Jewish people have, throughout history, been portrayed as physically unattractive no matter how much that is based in reality or not. Take for example, the caricatures and pictures from the holocaust (as well as before and after that time).



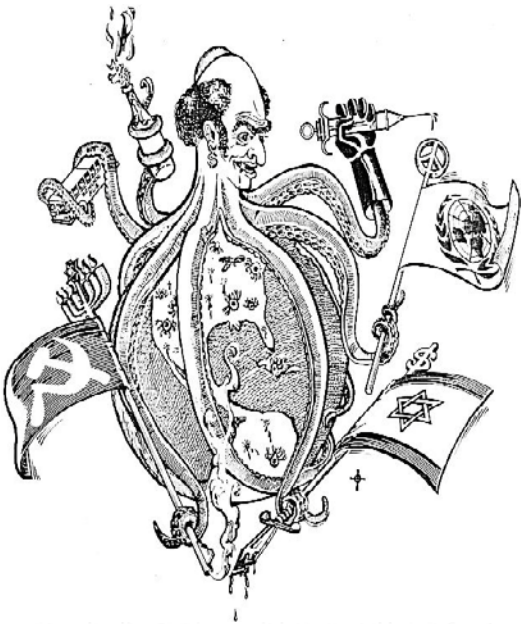
THE JEWS ARE A RACE SO REPULSIVE... SO CONNING... SO DESPICABLE THAT SOME PEOPLE ARE WILLING TO DESTROY THEMSELVES JUST TO RID THE PLANET OF ONE OR TWO!

It is not as if the Jewish people are literally so hideous to look at. But what is fascinating is that the world that hates us thinks of us as unattractive. The world thinks of us as ugly. So it is interesting the way Jews have been pictured throughout history.

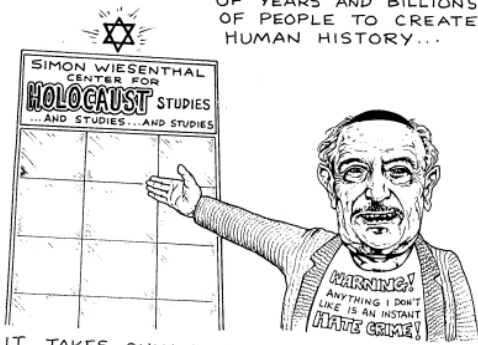
Das Ungeziefer



Das Leben ist nicht lebenswert,
 Wo man nicht dem Schmaroher wehet,
 Als Himmerfakt herumzukriechen,
 Wie müssen und wie werden liegen.



IT TAKES THOUSANDS
OF YEARS AND BILLIONS
OF PEOPLE TO CREATE
HUMAN HISTORY...



IT TAKES ONLY ONE DECREDIT, RAT-FACED
GARGOYLE WITH UNLIMITED U.S. GOVERNMENT
SUPPORT TO REWRITE IT... ORWELL SAID IT BEST:
*"Who controls the past controls the future;
Who controls the present controls the past."*

How interesting that throughout Jewish history, not just in the last fifty years of Nazi propaganda, Jews have been portrayed as having tails, having big noses, being ugly, being fat and disgusting. Throughout most of Jewish history, we have been rejected, a despised people.

Despised and Rejected

Isaiah 53:3

He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with disease; and like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

And, we can see this pointed out in other places in the Hebrew bible, too. This is why, when the servant is exalted, it's going to startle many nations. Considering how Israel has been treated by these nations, it's no wonder that they are going to be shocked – no one is going to be expecting it. Where in the Hebrew bible are the Jewish people described as being despised and rejected?

Isaiah 54:7

For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you.

Isaiah 54:11

O afflicted one, storm-tossed, and not comforted, behold, I will set your stones in antimony, and your foundations I will lay in sapphires.

Isaiah 60:15

Whereas you have been forsaken and hated, so that no one went through you, I will make you an eternal excellence, a joy of many generations.

It is significant that the above verses, referring to Israel as being rejected and/or forsaken were also written by the prophet Isaiah. This should give us a clue as to who the prophet was speaking about in this chapter when he describes a servant who was rejected and forsaken.

Notice that in verse three, the passage does not say that the servant is acquainted with grief, as is often translated in the Christian bibles, it is properly translated as acquainted with disease or sickness. And while

we have no evidence whatsoever that Jesus was ill, we do see certain references to Israel as being wounded or ill. First, let's look at verse three in the Hebrew:

וכמסתר פנים ממנו נבזה ולא חשבנהו: חלי נבזה וחדל אישים איש מכאבות וידוע

Literally translated, verse three tells us that the servant knows sickness. So let's look at some verses that would help us to see Israel in this light:

Acquainted with Disease

Jeremiah 30:17

'For I will restore you to health and I will heal you of your wounds,' declares the Lord, 'because they have called you an outcast, saying: "It is Zion; no one cares for her."'

Hosea 6:1

Come, let us return to the Lord. For He has torn us, but He will heal us; He has wounded us, but He will bandage us.

Isaiah 30:26

The light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be seven times brighter, like the light of seven days, on the day the Lord binds up the fracture of His people and heals the bruise He has inflicted.

Micah 1:9

For her wound is incurable, for it has come to Judah; it has reached the gate of my people, even to Jerusalem.

Jewish national suffering is described as sickness and wounds. When the bible describes the suffering of the Jewish People, it describes it as an individual who is sick and wounded, in keeping with the correct translation of the verse, that the servant is acquainted with sickness.

Stricken, Smitten and Afflicted

Isaiah 53:4

Surely our griefs he Himself bore, and our sorrows he carried; yet we ourselves esteemed him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

Here again we see yet another example where the New Testament gives us no reason to believe that this verse could apply to Jesus, and yet, we have from the Hebrew Scriptures, the very same wording used to refer to the nation of Israel.

Isaiah 49:13

Shout for joy, O heavens! And rejoice, O earth! Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains! For the Lord has comforted His people and will have compassion on His afflicted.

Jeremiah 14:19

Have You completely rejected Judah? Or have you loathed Zion? Why have You stricken us so that we are beyond healing? We waited for peace, but nothing good came; and for a time of healing, but behold, terror!

We see clearly in the scriptures that the nation of Israel is described as rejected, forsaken, afflicted and stricken – the same wording used by Isaiah in chapter 53 to describe the servant. But, do we see any evidence in the Hebrew bible that the messiah will be? None, whatsoever. In all of the verses that clearly describe the end times, or messianic era, we see only a righteous king who will reign. Nowhere do these passages indicate that this king, the one we call the messiah, indicate that he will be rejected. The fact that he will reign during a time when the whole world worships the God of Israel, would in fact, contradict this idea.

The Confession of the Nations

When we go back to our original question, “who is speaking in Isaiah 53,” the pieces of the puzzle all begin to fall into place. In Isaiah 53, the nations of the world are saying, “oh my G-d, what's going on? Look at this, we never expected this!” In their shock and surprise, they are forced to deal with an even bigger question. If the Jewish People are being exalted now and if the Jewish People were right about the messiah, then the Jewish People were not suffering because of they didn't believe in Jesus - why did the Jews suffer throughout history? Not because they (The Jews) were evil, because `we' (the nations) were the bad guys, `we' were the people who were evil.

The entire chapter of Isaiah 53 is a confession being made by the nations of the world. Throughout history, the nations of the world believed that the Jewish people were not only suffering for their rejection of Jesus, but that the nations were acting as God's instrument. They believed that by causing the suffering of the Jewish people, they were doing God's will, God's work. According to Isaiah 53, at the end of time, they are not going to see what they are expecting. Instead of Jesus coming back and rewarding them, they will suddenly be aware that it was their own sins that caused them to treat the Jewish people the way they did and that they are the ones worthy of God's wrath. What will be left to say? They will be left speechless.

Isaiah 53:5-6

(5) But he was wounded from our transgressions, He was crushed as a result of our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed.

(6) All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.

You may notice that the translation here of verse 5 is slightly different from that which we gave at the beginning of this chapter. The most common translation is, “he was wounded for our transgressions.” That wording gives the impression that the servant is somehow going to be acting vicariously, for the sins of the people. But, when we look at the Hebrew, we get a completely different understanding:

מדכא מעונתינו מוסר שלומנו עליו ובחברתו נרפא-לנו: מפשענו והוא מחלל

The correct way to translate this is, “he was wounded from our transgressions.” In other words, it was our bad deeds, our sins that caused him to be injured. This translation confirms what we have been seeing all along. That is, that the nations will suddenly realize that the Jewish people weren’t being punished for their sins, but that the nations sinned in their oppression of the Jewish people. That’s enough to put anyone into shock!

The bible clearly indicates that the nations thought they were not guilty because the Jewish people had been rejected by God.

Jeremiah 50:7

All that found them have devoured them; and their adversaries said: 'We are not guilty'; because they have sinned against the Lord, the habitation of justice, even the Lord, the hope of their fathers.

Jeremiah 30:17

For I will restore you to health and I will heal you of your wounds,' declares the Lord, 'Because they have called you an outcast, saying: "It is Zion; no one cares for her."'

Psalms 94:5, 7

(5) They crush Your people, O Lord, and afflict Your heritage.

(7) And they say: 'The Lord will not see, neither will the God of Jacob give heed.'

Like a Lamb led to slaughter

In some regards, this is a difficult verse. Because just as we showed that Jesus was not silent before his accusers, the same could be said of the nation of Israel, who, after thousands of years of persecution by the world have in many respects begun to stand up for itself. If we consider the servant to be a righteous remnant of Israel, this changes things, because of the many righteous Jews who have not responded, or been afforded the opportunity to fight back. Like the children of the Fogel family who were slaughtered in their sleep with no opportunity to respond – they were surely like sheep led to the slaughter. They never saw it coming and they never put up a fight, they simply died because they were part of the nation of Israel. That certainly seems to satisfy the verse. But on top of that, and perhaps more importantly, we have corroboration from elsewhere in the bible that God considered the nation of Israel as sheep, going to the slaughter. That should conquer any remaining objections that we have to this comparison.

Isaiah 53:7

He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so he did not open his mouth.

In Isaiah 53:7, we are told that this servant is like a lamb led to the slaughter. The exact meaning of this phrase is open to interpretation, but the bible itself uses this phrase specifically in reference to the nation of Israel:

Psalms 44:11, 22

(11) You give us as sheep to be eaten and have scattered us among the nations.

(22) But for Your sake we are killed all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

Cut off from the land of the living

Isaiah 53:8

By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due?

Many missionaries will point to the fact that verse 8 says that the servant will be cut off from the land of the living. They are quick to point out that while Jesus died, the nation of Israel still lives. Therefore, it makes sense that this verse supports the idea that Jesus is the servant, but not Israel. However, we have a problem with this understanding.

The phrase, “the land of the living” or ארץ חיים was an idiom during biblical times (and even in more modern times) referring specifically to the land of Israel. Read with this understanding, the verse no longer means that the servant is killed, but rather, that he is exiled from the land of Israel – something that the nation of Israel did fulfill. A more correct translation of this verse is:

Isaiah 53:8

From dominion and judgment he was taken away, and his history – who is able to relate? For he was cut off out of the land of the living. As a result of the transgression of my people, they were afflicted.

In the Hebrew, we see another problem with the Christian translation:

מפֿשֶׁע עמי נגע למו: מעצר וממשפט לקח ואת־דורו מי ישׁוּחַח כי נגזר מארץ חיים

The underlined passage contains the word מפֿשֶׁע which means from the sin or as a result of the sin [of my people], it cannot read “for”, this is an error in the translation designed to lead the reader to understand that the servant is cut off “for” or as a sacrifice for sins. This is a criminal manipulation of the verse, it is incorrect.

Remember when we said that the key to understanding this chapter is who is speaking? In this case, verse 8 can be read two different ways regarding the word “my people”, עמי. If we understand the speaker in verse 8 to be the Kings of the nations as was the case in verse 7 and following, then the people would be the gentiles, the people of the kings who are speaking. If we understand the speaker to have changed to G-d, then we must see “my people” as being the Jewish people.

While the fact that who the verse is speaking about is not clear and that would bother some people, it is not a problem for our purposes here. Either way it is understood, Israel fulfills the verse, because when we read the Hebrew, we no longer see a verse describing the servant as being one who is killed in order to take the punishment for God’s people. Rather, we see that the servant was exiled because of the sin of “my people.” Why was Israel exiled from the land of Israel? Because of her sin, but she was also exiled because of the arrogance and sin of the nations. Either way, Israel fits this verse far better than any other contender, given the whole context of the chapter.

See his seed, prolong his days

Isaiah 53:10

But the Lord was pleased to crush him, putting him to grief; If he would render himself as a guilt offering, he will see his offspring, he will prolong his days, and the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand.

Of all the verses in Isaiah 53, this one verse presents the biggest problem for Christians. We already saw that Jesus didn't fulfill the verse because he never had children; neither did he live a long life, even by biblical standards.

Stepping back and taking a look at the bigger picture here, the prophet seems to be saying that God desired to persecute the Jews, it was God's will that the Jews go through some suffering. However, if the nation would offer itself as a guilt offering, if the Jews would take their suffering and raise it up as an offering to God, then he would merit the continue existing for a long time and to see generations to come.

Does God give tests? Would He test the nation of Israel in such a way? When did G-d first in some way afflict a Jewish person to see how he would react? This was the great test of the first Jew - through Abraham. God wanted to test Abraham, so he told Abraham to sacrifice (kill) his son, his son born in old age. After Abraham proved himself faithful to God, what happened? Abraham showed God that he feared Him above all else. So much so that he was willing to kill his beloved son. In the same way, God tests the Jewish people, often by causing them to suffer. Here, the passage says that if the Jewish people take the test and raise it up as an offering to God, they would be rewarded.

Origen's Contra Celsus

Approximately 200 years after Jesus' death, a well respected Church Father named Origen composed an essay called, "Contra Celsus". In this article Origen states that the Jews understand Isaiah 53 to be about Israel. This is significant only because many times missionaries will claim that up until around the year 1000 CE, the traditional Jewish understanding was that Isaiah 53 referred to the messiah. The claim, in keeping with many that we have already seen, is that around the year 1000 CE, some Rabbi decided that the Jewish understanding that Isaiah 53 referred to the messiah was dangerous, since it would lead some to become Christians, and so he suggested that the traditional understanding be changed to Israel.

As we have already seen, Isaiah himself has told us that Israel is the servant of God. Origen's statement just goes to show that this understanding is much older than the missionaries would like to claim.

I remember that once in a discussion with some whom the Jews regard as learned I used these prophecies. At this the Jew said that these prophecies referred to the whole people as though of a single individual, since they were scattered in the dispersion and smitten, that as a result of the scattering of the Jews among the other nations many might become proselytes. In this way he explained the text: 'Thy form shall be inglorious among men'; and 'those to whom he was not proclaimed shall see him'.

Although it is not common to see Christian translations of the bible agree with the Jewish understanding of this chapter, some Christian bible scholars do agree.

The New English Bible, Oxford Study Edition

52.12-53.12: Fourth servant song. **The suffering servant.** See 42.1-4n. Israel, the servant of God, has suffered as a humiliated individual. However, the servant endured without complaint because it was vicarious suffering (suffering for others). **13-15:** *Nations* and *kings* will be surprised to see the servant *exalted*. **53.1:** The crowds, pagan nations, among whom the servant (Israel) lived, speak here (through v.9), saying that the significance of Israel's humiliation and exaltation is hard to believe. **2:** In traditional Hebrew thought, the good man prospers like a tree by water but the wicked is like a *plant* growing in *parched ground*; see Ps.1.3-6. **3:** *Turn away their eyes:* lit. hide their faces, an expression used in relation to lepers, whose sickness, considered a sign of sin, made them *despised*. **4-5:** The vicarious suffering expressed here is in contrast both to the traditional solidarity of in guilt of Exod. 20.5 and to individual responsibility proposed by the prophets at the time of the Exile; see Jer. 31.30; Ezek. Ch. 18. **5:** *Health for us:* lit. "our peace," which means "general welfare." **6-7:** The servant is *led like a sheep* in contrast to the peoples going their *own way*. **8:** Although some legal process seems to be involved, the servant does not receive justice; see Jer. 39.5-6. **9:** The death probably refers to the destruction and Exile of Israel. Compare Ezek. Ch. 37. **10-12:** The theme of 52.13 is resumed. Israel, which has suffered for all mankind will now be granted her rightful place. **10:** *Long life* and *children's children* are the signs of a final vindication before God; see Job 42.16-17. **11:** *Bathed in light:* enjoying God's favor; see Ps.80.3.

So in the end, we see that Isaiah 53 is about Israel. Are there any other passages in the bible that describe that the nations of the world are going to be shocked by the end of history?

Micah 7:15-16

(15) "As in the days when you came out from the land of Egypt, I will show you miracles."

(16) Nations will see and be ashamed of all their might. They will put their hand on their mouth, their ears will be deaf.

Isaiah 41:11

Behold, all those who are angered at you will be shamed and dishonored; those who contend with you will be as nothing and will perish.

Jeremiah 16:19

O Lord, my strength and my stronghold, and my refuge in the day of distress, to You the nations will come From the ends of the earth and say, "Our fathers have inherited nothing but falsehood, Futility and things of no profit."

So finally, when all is said and done, we are left with the very thing that we began with. If we read chapter 53 within the context of chapter 52 and chapter 54, we see a consistent theme which is actually echoed in the rest of the book of Isaiah.

What is the theme of Isaiah 52-54?

Isaiah 52

(1) Awake, awake, Clothe yourself in your strength, O Zion; Clothe yourself in your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; For the uncircumcised and the unclean Will no longer come into you.

(2) Shake yourself from the dust, rise up, O captive Jerusalem; Loose yourself from the chains around your neck, O captive daughter of Zion.

(3) For thus says the Lord, "You were sold for nothing and you will be redeemed without money."

(7) How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, and says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

(9) Break forth, shout joyfully together, you waste places of Jerusalem; For the Lord has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem.

(10) The Lord has bared His holy arm in the sight of all the nations, that all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God.

Isaiah 52 talks about the Jewish People being oppressed without reason, who are eventually redeemed by God and the nations witness the "arm of the Lord" and the "salvation of God."

Isaiah 54

(4) "Fear not, for you will not be put to shame; and do not feel humiliated, for you will not be disgraced; But you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.

(5) "For your husband is your Maker, Whose name is the Lord of hosts; and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel, who is called the God of all the earth.

(14) "In righteousness you will be established; you will be far from oppression, for you will not fear; and from terror, for it will not come near you.

(17) "No weapon that is formed against you will prosper; and every tongue that accuses you in judgment you will condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their vindication is from Me," declares the Lord.

Summary

Isaiah 52 speaks about the suffering of the Jewish people throughout history and their ultimate redemption. Isaiah 54 speaks about the suffering of the Jewish people throughout history and their ultimate redemption.

What good reason is there to assume that chapter 53 is on a completely different theme; not the suffering of the Jewish people throughout history and their ultimate redemption, but of a man/god savior who would suffer and die to take away the sins of the world? It just doesn't make sense. The Jewish people are despised, rejected, and persecuted. Then, they are exalted, redeemed, lifted up. Since this is a theme that runs consistently throughout the book of Isaiah, especially chapters 40 through the end, there is no reason to believe that chapter 53 has suddenly shifted gears and is talking about something entirely different. The conclusion is clear: the servant of Isaiah 53 is Israel.