

THE SUFFERING SERVANT: ISAIAH 53

This amazing passage from the Hebrew Scriptures was written over 700 years before the birth of Jesus. Who is it about?

It is found in Jewish Bibles today, though it is left out of the weekly synagogue readings (as are many other texts of the Bible). When people read Isaiah 53 without knowing which part of the Bible it comes from, they often wrongly assume it's from the New Testament. Did Isaiah foresee the sufferings of Jesus to pay for our sins?

Though many modern rabbis —and *some* ancient rabbis— say the sufferings described are those of the nation of Israel, **most ancient rabbis said it refers to Messiah's sufferings.** We have provided quotations from some of the great rabbinic sources which interpreted the passage as referring to the Messiah, even though they did not believe in Jesus.

We have also provided discussion as to why Isaiah 53 cannot refer to Israel and to whom it must necessarily refer. The passage actually begins with the end of Isaiah chapter 52. **Read it for yourself and see who you think it is:**

Isaiah 52:13-53:12

Behold, my servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. As many were astonished at him —his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the sons of men — so shall he sprinkle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they shall see, and that which they have not heard they shall understand.

Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of

sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

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

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.

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.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth. 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, stricken for the transgression of my people?

And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to bruise him; he has put him to grief; after he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand; he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities.

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 to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

WHAT DID THE RABBIS SAY?

Maybe you weren't told, but many ancient rabbinic sources understood Isaiah 53 as referring to the Messiah:

Babylonian Talmud: The Messiah --what is his name?...The Rabbis say, The Leper Scholar, as it is said, *surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows:* yet we did esteem him a leper, *smitten of God and afflicted.* (Sanhedrin 98b)

Midrash Ruth Rabbah: “Another explanation (of Ruth ii.14): -- He is speaking of king Messiah;... as it is said, *But he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities*”

Zohar: *He was wounded for our transgressions, ...the Messiah then enters, and summons every sickness, every pain, and every chastisement of Israel; they all come and rest upon him. And were it not that he had thus lightened them off Israel and taken them upon himself, there had been no man able to bear Israel's chastisements for the transgression of the law: and this is that which is written, Surely our sicknesses he hath carried.* (Zohar Section ויקהל)

Rabbi Moses Maimonides: Isaiah speaks similarly of the time when he shall appear, without father or mother or family being known, *He grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground, etc....* in the words of Isaiah, when describing the manner in which kings will harken to him, *Kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they shall see, and that which they have not heard they shall understand.* (From the Letter to the South (Yemen), quoted in The Fifty-third Chapter of Isaiah According to the Jewish Interpreters, Ktav Publishing House, 1969, Volume 2, pages 374-5)

Clearly, many ancient rabbis believed Isaiah 53 referred to the Messiah!

WHY ISAIAH 53 *MUST* SPEAK OF THE MESSIAH AND NO ONE ELSE:

1. The servant of Isaiah 53 is an innocent and guiltless sufferer. Israel is never described as sinful. Isaiah 1:4 says of the nation: *Alas sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity.*

2. The prophet said: *It pleased the LORD to bruise him.* Has the awful treatment of the Jewish people (so contrary, by the way, to the teaching of Jesus to love everyone) really been God's pleasure, as is said of the suffering of the servant in Isaiah 53:10? This makes no sense, yet it makes perfect sense to say that God was pleased to have Messiah suffer and die as our sin offering to provide us forgiveness and atonement.

3. The person mentioned in this passage suffers silently and willingly. Brave Jewish men and women fought in resistance movements against Hitler. Remember the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising? Remember the Jewish men who fought on the side of the allies? **This doesn't fit Isaiah 53.**

4. The figure described suffers to *atone* for his people's sins. The Hebrew word used in Isaiah 53:10 for "sin-offering" is "asham." This is a technical term used in Leviticus chapters 5 & 6 for a sacrifice that pays for personal guilt. Whoever Isaiah 53 speaks of, the figure described suffers and dies in order to provide a legal payment for sin so that others can be forgiven. This cannot be true of the Jewish people as a whole, or of any other mere human.

5. The figure of Isaiah 53 dies, is buried and rises again. Jesus died, was buried, and rose again. This doesn't fit Israel, either.

6. The second verse of Isaiah 53 makes it crystal clear. The figure grows up as "a young plant, and like a root (shoresh) out of dry ground." The shoot springing up is beyond reasonable doubt a reference to the Messiah, and, in fact, it is a common Messianic

reference in Isaiah and elsewhere. The Davidic dynasty was to be cut down in judgement like a felled tree, but it was promised to Israel that a new sprout would shoot up from the stump. The Messiah was to be that sprout. Compare Isaiah 11:10, where the same word is used to describe Messiah the "Root (shoresh) of Jesse," Jesse being David's father.

Messiah is the shoot who sprung up from the fallen Davidic dynasty. He became the King of Kings. He provided the ultimate atonement. How can the sacrifice of one man be of enough value for his punishment to satisfy the judgement deserved by many? Messiah was more than a man, he was God residing among us clothed in human nature, his sacrifice was of infinite value and enough for all who believe. When you receive the Messiah as your guilt offering, in payment for your sin, your guilt is done away with. Will you receive the Messiah as your substitute sufferer punished in your place for your sins?

RECEIVE GOD'S MERCY

God is reaching out to you now. He is giving you a chance to come into a renewed relationship with him. The only obstacle that can get in the way is your unbelief, but God is able to overcome that, as well. Why not pray and ask the God of Israel to help you to believe whatever is the truth. Confess your sins to Him and then thank Him that Messiah came to suffer for *your* sins. Ask him to renew your heart so that you will live a life of grateful obedience as he enables you. A loving God has provided the way back to Him through Messiah Jesus. Will you turn to God and receive the love he offers?

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THE SUFFERING SERVANT OF ISAIAH 53



WHO CAN IT BE?