

Isaiah 53 contains the whole story of Messiah's sufferings and the glory which was to follow. Before we go on, our dear reader should understand that this Suffering Servant passage also includes Isaiah 52:13-15, as chapter breaks are not part of the original texts and this is really a bad one.

Due to its most accurate and vivid account of the crucifixion of Christ, the redeemed have often referred to this chapter as the *Great Calvary Chapter*. Other Christian scholars have called it a *Photograph of the Cross* and *the Golden Passional of the Old Testament*.

It Shouldn't Surprise

Many are amazed that so many people, especially from within the Jewish Community, can read this chapter and not see Jesus. But considering the information we will share with you below, it is really not surprising at all.

The majority of Jewish scholars today claim Isaiah 53 has never been regarded as a prophecy of the Messiah by their own people, and certainly not before the time of Jesus.

But they go even further than this, stating that Isaiah's vision of the Suffering Servant does not refer to an individual Messianic Figure at all, but rather to the people of Israel as a whole, who suffered oppression and affliction throughout history.

Noting the Vain Attempts

First of all, the view that the Suffering Servant refers to Israel and not an individual is very questionable. Isaiah says:

For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken
for the transgression of my people.

(Isaiah 53:8)

This says the Servant actually died, "*was cut off out of the land of the living.*" Certainly, many in Israel did die over the course of history, but the nation collectively did not perish. In fact, God promised that this could never happen (see Jeremiah 31:35-37).

Second, we must ask how the Suffering Servant can be stricken for God's people and at the same time *be* God's people.

Furthermore, Isaiah stresses that the Suffering Servant was a righteous Person without violence and deceit. This is not true of the people of Israel, even the best of them. Their history is one of sin and rebellion and this is made clear throughout the whole Book of Isaiah itself.

Another good reason this passage cannot be identified with Israel is because it would make the pronouns inconsistent. In the text, the people of Israel are speaking and identify themselves in the first person, we, our, us. However, they describe the Servant in the third person, He, Him, etc.

Last, if it is true that the Suffering Servant is the nation of Israel, then why has the majority of synagogues omitted the reading of Isaiah 53? And why has it been called "*the torture chamber of the rabbis*" and "*the bad conscience of the Synagogue?*" And why is the average Jew severely punished for studying it until he reaches a certain age?

Addressing the Other Great Error

Concerning the second question – that the Jewish Community has never interpreted the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 as a prophecy related to the coming Messiah – there is much evidence to the contrary!

Numerous respected Messianic Jews with knowledge of the Targums, the Talmud and the Mishnah have closely examined these works and discovered that there is much evidence therein that the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 was indeed universally interpreted as referring to the Messiah, although they did not associate its fulfilment to the Lord Jesus Christ.

They also discovered that the view the Servant in Isaiah's prophecy was referring to Israel was not proposed until the eleventh century. The first to apply the passage to Israel was the influential medieval Jewish commentator Rabbi Shlomo Ben Yitzhak, also known as Rashi.

This man became one of the world's most famous and iconic figures in Judaism, best known for his talent in interpreting the Bible and the Talmud. He founded a Talmudic School in his native city of Troyes, France, that attracted students from all over the world.

Today, most Jewish interpreters follow Rashi, as do most critical scholars. We will speak more on him later, after we have examined some of the evidence.

A Handful of Many Proofs

Among the earliest Targums are those of Jonathan ben Uzziel, that dates from the first century A.D. His Targums on Isaiah 53 begin with: “Behold my servant Messiah shall prosper; he shall be exalted and great and very powerful.”

Another important Rabbi that interpreted Isaiah 53 to be a reference to the Messiah in his writings is Moses ben Maimon, better known as Maimonides or the Rambam. He wrote:

Regarding the mission by which Messiah will present himself, ... he will not commend himself to our veneration by reason of his notable extraction; but the marvellous deeds he shall perform will show him to be the anticipated Messiah ...

Isaiah states, “He grew like a tender plant, and as a root out of dry land,” signifying, that his exact descent will not be known, till his successful career will direct people’s attention to it....

But a noteworthy circumstance will be that crowned heads will stand amazed.... So they will remain in utter silence, as Isaiah predicts, “At him will kings shut their mouths, for what had not been told unto them shall they see, and what they never heard shall they understand.”

The Babylonian Talmud contains commentaries on Isaiah 53, one of which says:

God will burden the Messiah with commandments and sufferings as with millstones.

(Talmud Sanhedrin 93b)

In a part of the Midrash on Isaiah 53, called the *Haggadah*, the Holy One makes an agreement with the Messiah and says to Him:

The sins of those which are forgiven for your sake will cause you to be put under an iron yoke ... And on account of their sins your tongue will cleave to your mouth.

(Pesiqta Rabbati chapter 36)

In addition to these, there is evidence that a Hasidic Sect in contemporary Judaism has begun to interpret Isaiah 53 in a Messianic way. I am referring to the Lubavitch Movement. They once regarded Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson as the Messiah.

And after his death due to a stroke in 1994 many of his disciples claimed that his illness was redemptive suffering, and that he was fulfilling the prophecy concerning the Suffering Servant of Isaiah.

The fact that these Hasidic Jews believed that the Messiah could suffer and die caused great controversy in the Jewish world, since this is the main reason that most Jews have long rejected Jesus as Messiah.

The Dead Sea Brings Life!

Last, there is evidence that the Dead Sea Scrolls contain a Messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53. A fragment from Cave 4 actually identifies this Messiah as a Person who will suffer for the sins of His people and will be rejected and killed. Another Cave 4 Scroll makes an extraordinary reference to the future Messiah as the Son of the Most High.

These are just a handful of the many proofs, but sufficient to demonstrate that early Rabbis did indeed interpret the Suffering Servant as the Messiah and not as a reference to the Jewish people, as many claim.

What about the New Testament?

Some will no doubt argue against the evidence presented above, underlining that the New Testament itself clearly supports the notion that a Suffering Messiah was not the dominant Jewish expectation of Jesus' Day.

That is true, but the reason is because the majority at that time had misguided opinions concerning the Messiah, and this because they had foolishly trusted their "blind guides," many of which were operating in the same spirit as Shlomo Ben Yitzhak!

Honour to Whom Honour Is Due?

In 1990 the *Rashi University Institute* was founded. This is a European centre for Jewish and Semitic studies, and which also provides courses and classes to a universal audience.

In the very same year, Rashi's anniversary was celebrated and his name honoured with the erection of a monument resting on a hexagonal granite plinth! The monument is a Black and White Ball, which symbolizes "contrasts" and bears the Rabbi's epigram!

And it would appear that Rabbi Rashi was not the only important figure associated with the city of Troyes in France. The place is also closely linked to Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who played a major role in the foundation of the Knights Templar and was also an advocate of the Second Crusade to the Holy Land.

Bernard is also well known for his defence of the Rhineland Jews, and Jews in general, and is reported to have said that any attempt on the life of a Jew was a sin tantamount to making an attempt on the life of Jesus. However, he preached that war against Muslims was legitimate!!