

Of Whom Does the Prophet Speak?

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Isaiah 53 is perhaps the pivotal chapter in the Jewish Bible in helping determine the identity of the Messiah and the work he would do. With the possible exception of the seventy weeks prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27, the grandeur of this chapter certainly surpasses all other messianic texts. It is sublime in its content; pointed in its truth; convicting in its clarity; and challenging in its proposition.

Why, then, is there such dispute over this clearest of all chapters in regard to the work of the Messiah? Why are there some in the Jewish community who fervently deny this chapter speaks of the Messiah, or at best, say it is only one possibility?

Gershom Scholem was a Jewish philosopher and historian born in Germany in 1897 who died in 1982. In his book *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, he makes a candid statement about the "suffering servant" passages of Isaiah which includes chapter 53. "In the Tannaitic period [A.D. 70-200] the 'suffering servant' passages had occasionally been interpreted as referring to the Messiah, but later Haggadists as well as the medieval commentators preferred different interpretations. In order to undermine Christian exegesis, which identified the suffering servant as Christ, he was interpreted as a figure of Moses, or of Israel, or of the pious in general. In Jewish - Christian disputations the Jewish spokesman always denied that the passages referred to the Messiah."¹

The sad fact is Jewish spokesmen to this day are trained to deny that Isaiah 53 speaks of the Messiah when discussing this with Christians. Despite the historical basis for this chapter speaking of the Messiah, there is a denial of, not only the historical understanding of the Jewish community, but the clear words of the prophet. It is anathema to some in the Jewish community to even suggest this passage may speak of a suffering Messiah because of the possible connection with Jesus.

Let's take a look at the twelve brief verses that constitute the 53rd Isaiah as we focus on certain aspects of each verse. If you are not familiar with them I think you will see the clarity, pointedness, and challenge of this most sublime of all chapters concerning Messiah.

The challenge to believe (vs. 1)

Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?

The wording is clear, pointed, and challenging. Will we believe the prophet's report? Will we accept what is about to be revealed? It should not matter what the rabbi says. The wishes of the family should not be an issue. The question is, will we believe the report? Will we put aside preconceived notions and read with as much of an unbiased heart and mind as possible? We must, as this prophecy is given to us from the LORD.

The birth of the Messiah (vs. 2)

For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

A root doesn't come out of dry ground, yet, "he shall grow up before him as a root out of a dry ground." This speaks of the divine control of the events. God ("him" refers back to "LORD" in verse one) would superintend in the life of the servant of this passage from his birth through his life. From his miraculous conception and virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18-23) through his perfect life, God was orchestrating what was developing. To the human eye, though, there was nothing compelling about him that we should desire him.

The reception of the Messiah (vs. 3)

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

The servant would not be accepted by those he came to. Actually, most of the people he came to would reject him, despise him, not esteem him, and want to hide their faces from him. This is why when Jesus came, as John said, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not," (John 1:11). To this day, most Jewish people respond in this way to Jesus as Messiah.

The ministry of the Messiah (vs. 4)

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

The servant of Jehovah would bear our griefs and sorrows. He would be the one to suffer as a direct result of our sin. There was an understanding of cause and effect relationships in Jewish thought in biblical times. Sin produces consequences. We can see this in the question posed to Jesus by his Jewish followers in John 9:1-2. "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" For the man to be born blind, someone, either the man or his parents, had to have sinned. In the case of this verse in Isaiah, the servant took the consequences of other's sins — grief and sorrows. Others claimed, however, that he deserved this punishment. In their understanding, it was divine retribution for his sinful actions.

The purpose of Messiah's suffering (vs. 5)

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

It was the transgressions and iniquities of the people that produced the suffering of the servant. "But he" emphatically points out the error of those who think he justly received his punishment. No, his punishment was on the behalf of others.

It is instructive to understand that the word "wounded" literally means "he was pierced."² This prophecy was fulfilled in the death of Jesus.

Transgressions (of God's law) require a penalty. God will not arbitrarily give us peace (with Him) without a payment for the transgressions. It is through the servant, the Messiah, that we obtain peace with God and healing.

The cause of the sufferings of the Messiah (vs. 6)

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Our propensity is to go astray like sheep. We reject the teaching of the Bible and follow after our own ideas. It is sin when we follow our own thoughts, be they original with us or the teachings of other men.

God's love is seen in that He has "laid on him the iniquity of us all." The scapegoat of the Day of Atonement sacrifice (Lev. 16:10, 20-22) did not deserve to bear all the sins of the nation of Israel but it did. The "scapegoat" of Isaiah 53, the Messiah, in the same manner, took our sins upon Himself. God placed our sins upon Him.

The trial of the Messiah (vs. 7)

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

Humility, scorning, beatings, and worse was the lot of the servant of God. Not only would the Messiah be rejected but he would be treated in a harsh manner. The gospels record the oppression and affliction to which Jesus was subjected. Mark 14:65 tells us, "And some began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to buffet him, and to say unto him, Prophecy: and the servants did strike him with the palms of their hands."

How amazing He did not defend himself. Not before Pilate, nor the Sanhedrin, nor the Romans. It was not that he was totally quiet but that he never once complained they had the wrong man because he was innocent.

The death of the Messiah (vs. 8)

He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.

The servant was restrained in prison and did not receive justice when brought to trial. In fact, there

would be a great miscarriage of justice. The rhetorical question, "who shall declare his generation?," probably is the thought by onlookers that this one would have no influence on his generation or future generations.

The record of the trial of Jesus in the gospels clearly shows He did not get a fair trial nor justice in the pronounced verdict. Jesus died at the young age of 33 and the natural thought would be his "premature" death would prevent him from influencing many people then or in future generations. The two men on the road to Emmaus following Jesus' death had exactly these type of thoughts (Luke 24:13-21). It was because he was "cut off out of the land of the living" that there would be despair of this nature.

Yet again we are told the purpose of his death was for the sins of others. Some Jewish people may not want to accept this truth but it is the clear teaching of Isaiah.

The burial of the Messiah (vs. 9)

And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

The servant, Messiah, dies and in this verse we are told he was buried, "made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death."

The Messiah was perfect in every way. Externally, "he had done no violence." Internally, there was no "deceit in his mouth." A holy God would require a perfect offering. As the Passover lamb was to be without blemish, so we are told Jesus' death and our redemption is "with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:19). The servant would be the perfect "lamb of God" offered for the sins of the world.

The resurrection of the Messiah (vs. 10)

Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt 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.

God was the one who executed the punishment upon the servant. And God was pleased with his suffering. Not because the servant deserved it. No! It was because he was an offering for the sin of the entire world. He took the punishment and wrath of a holy God so we might be forgiven.

Two thoughts shouldn't be missed in the last phrases of this verse. First, he would rise from the grave. In verse 8 he died. In verse 9 he was buried. Here, he will "prolong his days." After dying and then being buried, to "prolong your days" requires one to live again, resurrect from the grave!

Second, God's pleasure would prosper in the servant. A person can only prosper with God, find favor with him, through the Messiah. We are sinners and need an offering, a substitute, in order to receive forgiveness of our sins. The Messiah is God's promised substitute to die for our sins. His resurrection showed God's favor upon him.

The personal acceptance of the Messiah (vs. 11)

He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.

Again, the comment is made that God sees what the servant/Messiah goes through and is satisfied. He is satisfied for one basic reason. The servant is emphatically stated to be "righteous." God's pronouncement of this servant being righteous sets him apart from all others.

The challenge to each of us is to believe in this servant, knowing the servant will bring justification. The knowledge here is more than just mental agreement with the facts. It is a personal heart attitude of belief and acceptance of the Messiah. "Justify" is a judicial term promising that we will be declared righteous if we have a personal knowledge of Messiah. Each individual has sinned against God (Romans 3:23) and is deserving of His punishment. God, in mercy and love, sent the Messiah to "bear [our] iniquities." He was our sin bearer. He took the wrath of God upon himself. Many, not all, will find forgiveness of their sins because they have accepted the Messiah's payment for their sins and God has thus forgiven them, justified them.

The second coming of the Messiah (vs. 12)

Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

The victor in battle divides the spoils. The Messiah will divide the spoil with those who have joined with him by accepting him as Messiah.

In closing Isaiah lists four reasons why the Messiah is victorious. It is as if he is emphatically reminding readers of the basic thrust of this entire chapter.

- 1) He has "poured out his soul unto death." He willingly died for us (John 10:15-18).
- 2) "He was numbered with the transgressors." The Messiah came to earth and walked among us. He allowed Himself to die the same type of death as lawbreakers even though He was innocent.
- 3) The purpose of His death was to "bare the sin of many." He died for our sins.
- 4) He made intercession for each one of us. We can't approach a holy God because of our sin. We see this truth in the sacrificial system of the Mosaic law. The individual Israelite brought a sacrifice which a priest would offer to God for him. Messiah is the ultimate High Priest that represents us before God. The sacrifice he offered was himself — the only perfect sacrifice, promised by God through the Jewish prophets and fulfilled in Jesus.

Isaiah 53 is speaking of Jesus and his work as Messiah. All other explanations of the meaning of this chapter come woefully short in meeting its requirements. Jesus is incontrovertibly the promised Messiah of Israel. He came first as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, and he is returning as the victorious Davidic king spoken of in other prophecies!

¹ Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, (Princeton, NJ, Princeton Univ. Press, 1973) pp. 53-54.

² Buksbazen, Victor, *The Prophet Isaiah, Volume II*, (West Collingswood, NJ, Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1971), p.417.