

JEWISH OBJECTIONS TO JESUS IN ISAIAH 53

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ADo you mean to tell me that Jewish people reject the teaching that the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 is the Messiah?@ To the young man=s question I replied: AYes, because the Christians used this passage to witness to Jewish folk with great success. So the Rabbis, in order to combat the success of the Christians, decided to re-interpret the passage.@ Today, the Rabbis have come up with several different interpretations.

THE NATION OF ISRAEL

Rashi, in the 11th century A.D., was the first to put forth the premise that the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is the nation of Israel. Others stated that the suffering servant was Moses or the pious in general. This was in total opposition to the teaching of the ancient Rabbis. For example, the targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel written in the 2nd century renders Isaiah 52:13: ABehold, my servant, the Messiah, shall prosper; He shall be exalted, and increase, and be very strong.@ (reprinted by Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1953). Rabbi Joseph ben Kaspi, who lived from A.D. 1280 to 1340, warned the Rabbis that Athose who expound this section of the Messiah give occasion to the heretics (Christians) to interpret it of Jesus.@ In response to this Rabbi Saadis ibn Danan observed: AMay God forgive him for not having spoken the truth.@ (Driver & Neubauer: The Suffering Servant of Isaiah According to Jewish Tradition, pg. 203).

There are at least eight reasons from the text itself why these interpretations cannot stand. First, consider the contrasting pronouns. In verse 2 for example, if the Ahe@ is Israel, Moses, or the pious, then who is the Ahim@ before whom Ahe@ grows up? Who is the Awe@ who sees "him"? Clearly the Awe@ and Aour@ of verse 3 is Israel or the Jewish people. It makes no sense if the "he" and "him" is also Israel. Not only do we have the problem of opposing pronouns, but we have singular and plural pronouns in the same text referring to the same object adding to the confusion if the servant is Israel.

Second, the servant is described as Arighteous@ in verse 11. Israel, according to Isaiah 1:4-6 is called Aunrighteous.@ Only God is called righteous.

Third, according to verse 7 the servant described does not fight back. Is it not true that Israel, as a nation, always has fought back? Read Kings and Chronicles to see this servant cannot be the nation of Israel.

Fourth, according to verses 6, 10, and 12, the servant bears the sins of sinners. Atonement is not the work of a nation, according to the Hebrew Scriptures; it is the work of the Redeemer who must be himself sinless. As Israel has always been described as Aunrighteous@ it cannot do anything of itself to atone either for its own sins or for the sins of others. The servant cannot be Israel.

Fifth, according to verse 9 there was no deceit in him. Note how Isaiah describes the nation of Israel in Isaiah 1:4: AAh sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward.@ Is this the description of a nation or a people without deceit?

Sixth, verse 12 indicates that the servant Apours out his soul unto death@ for the sins of others. It is clear that sin is atoned for through the shedding of blood (Lev. 17: 11). However, the atoning sacrifice had to be totally without spot or blemish (cf. Ex. 12:5; Lev. 4:3-32). Israel does not qualify.

Seventh, according to verse 8, the servant dies ("cut off from the land of the living"). Despite many attempts to destroy the Jewish people, they are still alive and well today.

Finally, verse 5 indicates that the sufferings of the servant would bring healing. Though the Jewish people have suffered much throughout the centuries, this verse is not describing physical healing. It is the healing of Atransgressions@ and Ainiquities.@ Through his sufferings the servant brings healing for our guilt. Guilt is a judicial concept. Thus the issue is spiritual healing from the just penalty of sin. As the sufferings of Israel and the Jewish people have failed to bring spiritual healing to either Jew or Gentile, the suffering servant cannot be Israel. Isaiah 53 cannot be speaking of the nation of Israel as the one being described here as the suffering servant.

THE OTHER SERVANT POEMS

Another argument against Jesus being the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is that of a contemporary rabbi who simply states that to interpret Isaiah 53 as Christians do is inconsistent with the teaching of the other servant poems preceding it. There are four servant poems: Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; and

52:13-53:12. A study of these poems will show that there is no inconsistency at all with the servant being Messiah.

The first poem speaks of a servant who appears as a person, Spirit-filled, with a mission to Gentiles. Isaiah taught that Messiah's ministry was not only to the Jewish people but also to Gentiles (cf. Isaiah 11:10; 60:3).

In the second servant poem the rabbi states that the servant is identified as the nation of Israel, not Messiah. Thus the servant in all four poems must be the nation of Israel. Does the second poem teach that Israel, the nation, is the servant? In verse 3 it would appear so: "Thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified." Certainly we know that Scripture teaches that one of God's purposes in choosing Israel was that through it He might be glorified. But when we come to verse 5 we have a problem: "The LORD that formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, though Israel be not yet gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and my God shall see my strength." If the nation of Israel is the servant, then who is Jacob? Can Israel bring Israel back to God? Again in verse 6 we read: "It is a light thing that thou shouldst be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob to restore the preserved of Israel." This poem shows true Israel embodied in a person who delivers unto God both Jew and Gentile (v. 6). This is the Messiah, as only he could accomplish this!

In the third poem the servant declares that he acts not of his own will, but has received from God both His saving doctrine and the power to proclaim it (v. 4). He willingly undertakes the work committed to Him, enduring all the sufferings and shame connected with it (vs. 5, 6). He affirms his confidence in God who will stand by him, destroying his enemies (vs. 7-9). To those who fear God, he exhorts them to place their trust in God alone. In verse 11 he speaks to the ungodly who rely upon themselves rather than upon God, declaring that they will bring destruction upon themselves, a destruction to be accomplished by the servant of Jehovah. This poem also speaks of the Messiah. Thus there are no inconsistencies with understanding the servant of Isaiah 53 as Messiah.

HE DID NO VIOLENCE

The Lubavitch ultra-orthodox sect has trained individuals often referred to as anti-missionaries. They say that Jesus did violent acts such as throwing out the money changers and cursing the fig tree. Thus he could not be the one spoken of in Isaiah 53:9. The Hebrew word translated "violence" is *chamac*. It literally means to do wrong, be unjust, or unrighteous. In driving the moneychangers from the Temple, Jesus was neither wrong nor unjust. He quoted from Isaiah 56:7 stating his reason for what he was about to do, saying: "It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of thieves." Nor was there anything wrong or unrighteous in judging a fig tree that should have been bearing fruit!

NO PHYSICAL CHILDREN

Some state that because Jesus had no physical children he therefore did not fulfill Isaiah 53:10: "A...he shall see his seed." They argue that the word "seed" (Hebrew *zera*) always refers to physical offspring, not spiritual offspring. Psalm 22:30 reads: "A seed shall serve him; it shall be accounted to the Lord for a generation." This cannot be a physical seed. This "seed" serves the Lord. Thus it is a spiritual seed. The same word is used in a similar way in Isaiah 57:4. The last part of the verse reads: "Are ye not children of transgression, a seed of falsehood?" Transgression is not human. It is a concept as is falsehood. Thus, the verse states that after the suffering servant has offered himself as a sacrifice for sin He shall see his seed. Thus "seed" is related to his sacrifice for sin. Therefore the seed are those who receive by faith his sacrifice for their sin and are thus born anew. The seed here is spiritual, just as it is in Psalm 22:30.

HIS DAYS NOT PROLONGED

Contending that Jesus died young, those seeking to combat the Christian say that he could not have fulfilled Isaiah 53: 10c: "He shall prolong his days." What a tragedy that our Jewish friends cannot see this is a prophecy of the resurrection of the suffering servant. The "He" of this phrase is God. The "His" is the suffering servant. Thus, though it pleased the LORD to put him to death as a sacrifice for sin, it also pleased Him to raise him up again! Hallelujah!

HE OPENED NOT HIS MOUTH

Finally, others say that Isaiah 53 states that the servant would not raise his voice or cry out. Yet Jesus did that several times from the cross, once in near blasphemy (Psalm 22:1) according to the anti-missionaries. They are alluding to Isaiah 53:7 which speaks of the servant at trial being falsely accused. Is there anything more natural than for one to open his mouth in his own defense? Yet not once did Jesus defend Himself! The context speaks for itself. The servant is Messiah.

CONCLUSION

If we accept Isaiah 53 at face value, and accept the understanding of the ancient Rabbis who had no ulterior reason to find another understanding, this wonderful chapter in our Bible speaks of the entire life, death, resurrection, and coming again of Israel's Messiah, the Lord Jesus! No wonder God has used it mightily to reach His people!