

Who is God's Suffering Servant?

The Rabbinic Interpretation of Isaiah 53

Despite strong objections from conservative Christian apologists, the prevailing rabbinic interpretation of Isaiah 53 ascribes the "servant" to the nation of Israel who silently endured unimaginable suffering at the hands of its gentile oppressors. The speakers, in this most-debated chapter, are the stunned kings of nations who will bear witness to the messianic age and the final vindication of the Jewish people following their long and bitter exile. "Who would have believed our report?," the astonished and contrite world leaders wonder aloud in dazed bewilderment (53:1).¹

The stimulus for the world's baffled response contained in this famed cluster of chapters at the end of the Book of Isaiah is the unexpected salvation of Israel. The redemption of God's people is the central theme in the preceding verse (52:12) where the "you" signifies the Jewish people who are sheltered and delivered by God. Moreover, the "afflicted barren woman" in the following chapter is protected and saved by God, and is also universally recognized as the nation of Israel² (54:1).

The well-worn claim frequently advanced by Christian apologists who argue that the noted Jewish commentator, Rashi (1040 CE – 1105 CE), was the first to identify the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 with the nation of Israel is inaccurate and misleading. In fact, Origen, a prominent and influential church father, conceded in the year 248 CE – many centuries before Rashi was born – that the consensus among the Jews in his time was that Isaiah 53 "bore reference to the whole [Jewish] people, regarded as one individual, and as being in a state of dispersion and suffering, in order that

many proselytes might be gained, on account of the dispersion of the Jews among numerous heathen nations."³

The broad consensus among Jewish, and even some Christian commentators, that the "servant" in Isaiah 52-53 refers to the nation of Israel is understandable. Isaiah 53, which is the fourth of four renowned Servant Songs, is umbilically connected to its preceding chapters. The "servant" in each of the three previous Servant Songs is plainly and repeatedly identified as the nation of Israel.

Isaiah 41:8-9

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off."

Isaiah 44:1

But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen!

Isaiah 44:21

Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you; you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.

Isaiah 45:4

For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I called you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me.

Isaiah 48:20

Go out from Babylon, flee from *Chaldea*, declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it out to the end of the earth; say, "The Lord has redeemed his servant Jacob!"

Isaiah 49:3

And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

According to this widespread rabbinic opinion, Isaiah 53 contains a deeply moving narrative which world leaders will cry aloud in the

messianic age. The humbled kings of nations (52: 15) will confess that Jewish suffering occurred as a direct result of "our own iniquity," (53:5) e.g., depraved Jew-hatred, rather than, as they previously thought, the stubborn blindness of the Jews.

The stunned reaction of the world's nations to the unexpected vindication and redemption of the Jewish nation in the messianic age is a recurring theme throughout the Hebrew Scriptures⁴. Israel's neighbors will be amazed when their age-old assessment of the Jew is finally proved wrong. Throughout Israel's long and bitter exile, the nations mistakenly attributed the miserable predicament of the Jew to his stubborn rejection of the world's religions. In the End of Days, however, the gentiles will discover what was until then unimaginable – the unwavering Jew was, in fact, all this time faithful to the one true God. On the other hand, "We despised and held him of no account" (53:3).

In essence, the final and complete redemption of the Jews, to which the stunned nations will bear witness, contradicts everything Israel's gentile neighbors had ever previously anticipated, heard, or considered (52:15). "Who would have believed our report?" the kings will ask with their mouths wide open in amazement (53:1). The curtain of blindness is finally lifted when the "holy Arm of the Lord before the eyes of all the nations, all the ends of the earth will witness the salvation of His people" (52:10).

The unanticipated vindication of the Jews in the End of Days, however, will raise nagging, introspective questions for Israel's neighbors: How then can we explain the Jews' long-enduring suffering at our own hands? After all, the age-old reasons we contrived to explain away Israel's agony are clearly no longer valid. Who is to blame for Israel's miserable existence in exile? In short, why did the servant of God seem to suffer without measure or cause?

Therefore, Isaiah 53:8 concludes with their stunning confession, "for the transgressions of my people [the gentile nations] they [the Jews] were stricken." The fact that the servant is spoken of in the

third person, plural Aml' (*lamo*) illustrates beyond doubt that the servant is a nation rather than a single individual.

The rabbinic interpretation of Isaiah 53 fits in seamlessly with its surrounding chapters which all clearly depict the nation of Israel as "despised, afflicted" (54:6-11), and oppressed "without cause" (52:4) at the hands of the gentile nations.

According to the most ancient rabbinic commentaries, the identification of Israel as God's servant is evident throughout the four Servant Songs. As such, rabbinic sources from the Talmudic period identify the servant of Isaiah 53 in the plain sense as the Jewish people, consistent with the previous three Servant Songs⁵.

For example, commenting on Isaiah 53 the Talmud Berachos 5a states:

Rava said in the name of Rav Sachorah who said it in the name of Rav Huna: Whomever the Holy One, blessed is He, desires, He crushes with afflictions as it is stated "And the one whom Hashem desires He crushed with sickness (Isaiah 53:10). Now, one might have thought that this applies even if he does not accept [the afflictions] with love. Scripture therefore states in the continuation of the verse "if his soul acknowledges his guilt" (ibid.)... And if he accepts [the afflictions with love] what is his reward? He will see offspring and live long days. Moreover, he will retain his studies, as it is stated "and the desire of *Hashem* will succeed in his hand" (ibid.).

The ancient Midrash Rabba on Numbers 23 likewise attests that Isaiah 53 refers to the nation of Israel:

"I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey" (Song of Songs 5:1): because the Israelites poured out their soul to die in captivity, as it is said, "Because he poured out his soul to die" (Isaiah 53:12).

Interestingly, the traditional Church did not completely satisfy the Christian mind with their stock interpretation of Isaiah 53. There is, therefore, a consensus among many modern, liberal Christian commentators which is in accord with this prevailing rabbinic

exegesis on this most debated chapter. For example, the commentary of the 11th century Rashi and the 20th century Christian Oxford New English Bible⁶ are strikingly similar. Both clearly identify the "suffering servant" in Isaiah 53 as the nation of Israel, who suffered as a humiliated individual at the hands of the gentile nations.

Conservative Christians, on the other hand, strongly argue against the Jewish interpretation of Isaiah 53 for a number of expected reasons. Historically, the Church has relentlessly used Isaiah 53 as its most important proof-text in order to demonstrate the veracity of the Gospels. They argue that this chapter proves that Jesus' death was explicitly prophesized in the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, the author of the Book of Acts claims that Philip converted an Ethiopian eunuch using Isaiah 53⁷, and the author of Luke⁸, John⁹, and I Peter¹⁰ associate Isaiah 53 with Jesus as well. While evangelicals routinely claim that Jesus is alluded to in several hundred verses throughout the Hebrew Bible, there is only a handful of passages in Tanach that the Church insists irrefutably identify Jesus alone as the messiah; Isaiah 53 is chief among these polemical texts.

Consequently, since time immemorial, missionaries fervently used Isaiah 53 to proclaim that the Hebrew prophet Isaiah predicted the advent of Christianity centuries before the birth of Jesus. Accordingly, the traditional Church recoils at the rabbinic interpretation of the fourth Servant Song. Such a monumental concession would require Christendom to abandon one of its most cherished polemical chapters used to defend its own teachings, and a vital part of its textual arsenal used against its elder rival, Judaism.

Besides, the systemic suffering of the Jews plays no essential role in Christian theology. The suffering of Jesus, on the other hand, is the cornerstone of Church doctrine. In fact, widespread Christian teachings throughout history concluded that the suffering of the Jews illustrates the wrongness of their beliefs, while the suffering of Jesus and his followers illustrates the truth and veracity of the

Cross. As a result, conservative Christians are unyielding in their rejection of the Jewish interpretation of Isaiah 53.

Liberal Christian scholars, on the other hand, are frequently in accord with the classic rabbinic commentaries on Isaiah 53. Unlike their conservative coreligionists, liberal Christians do not use or depend on Church dogma or creedal statements to interpret the Bible. In other words, liberal Christian Bible commentators tend to interpret scripture without any preconceived notion of the correctness of Church teaching.

Instead, they apply the same modern hermeneutics used to understand any ancient writings to their interpretation of the Bible. Given that Isaiah's first three Servant Songs clearly identify Israel as God's servant, and the surrounding chapters of Isaiah 53 clearly speak of Israel as a suffering and humiliated individual, liberal Christian scholarship frequently ascribes the servant in Isaiah's fourth Servant Song to the nation of Israel.¹¹

Rabbinic commentaries that state Isaiah 53 refers to the messiah

According to rabbinic thought when Isaiah speaks of the "servant," the prophet is not speaking of all the Jewish people. Rather, the "servant" in these uplifting prophetic hymns refers to the righteous remnant of Israel – the most pious of the nation. The faithful members of Israel who willingly suffer for Heaven's sake are identified in Tanach as God's servant. These are the devout that call upon the name of the Lord (43:7), who bear witness to His unity (43:11), and are therefore charged to restore the rest of Jacob (49:5).

"You are my witnesses declares the Lord, and My servant whom I have chosen" (43:10).

In essence, God's "servant" are the cherished few – the faithful who walk in the footsteps of Abraham, whom the Almighty called "My friend."

"But you, O Israel, My servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you,

descendants of Abraham My friend” (Isaiah 41:8)

Simply put, the Servant Songs address only the believers of Israel who emulate the first patriarch of the Jewish people. As Abraham endured trials and adversity in his walk with God, so too would His servant, the righteous remnant of Israel, endure ordeals and affliction in its sacred path (Isaiah 49:3; 51:21; 54:11; Psalm 44:11-15).

The Hebrew prophet Zephaniah vividly describes in two seminal verses the cherished remnant of Israel in the following manner:

“And I will leave in the midst of thee an afflicted and poor people, and they shall take refuge in the name of the Lord. The remnant of Israel shall not do iniquity, nor speak lies, neither shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth; for they shall feed and lie down, and none shall make them afraid” (Zephaniah 3:12-13).

In rabbinic thought, all of God’s faithful, gentiles included (Zechariah 13:8-9), endure suffering on behalf of God (Isaiah 40:2; Zechariah 1:15). Thus, Jewish leaders of the past, such as Moses¹² and Jeremiah¹³, Rabbi Akiva¹⁴, as well as future eschatological figures, such as the messiah ben Joseph and the messiah ben David, are held up in rabbinic literature as individuals who exemplify the “servant” who willingly suffers on behalf of Heaven.

Therefore, when the Talmud describes the predicament of the messiah as he is waiting to be summoned by God, the rabbis cast him as

“sitting among other paupers, all of them afflicted with disease. Yet, while all the rest of them tie and untie their bandages all at once, the messiah changes his bandages one at a time, lest he is summoned for the redemption at a moments notice” (Sanhedrin 98a).

While this story may be understood allegorically, its jarring message is clear: The messiah, like other afflicted members of Israel, endures the agony and trials assigned to the faithful. However, unlike the other suffering saints who completely remove

all their bandages before patiently replacing them with a fresh dressing, the messiah must methodically replace each bandage, one at a time. In other words, the messiah does not suffer more or less than other servants of God. Rather, according to the Talmud, the messiah is different from other men of God because he must be ready at a moment's notice to usher in the deliverance of his beleaguered people. Because he is prepared to be summoned for the redemption at all times, he is never in a predicament where his bandages are fully removed.

When Isaiah speaks of the suffering remnant of Israel, the messianic king is, therefore, included. The final heir of David's throne is an integral member of the pious of Israel. This is, according to rabbinic interpretation, the *pshat*, or the plain meaning of the text in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12. Therefore, when both ancient and modern rabbinic commentators expound on the clear meaning of the text, they ascribe the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 to the nation of Israel.

Moreover, while Ezekiel warned that the righteous can never suffer or die as a sacrificial atonement for the wicked¹⁵, the Talmud teaches:

“Whosoever weeps over the [suffering] of the righteous man, all his sins are forgiven.” (Talmud, Shabbat 105b)

In order to shed much needed light on the famed Servant Songs, numerous rabbinic commentators hold up Jewish heroes as a paradigm of Isaiah 53's “servant.” Accordingly, while on one hand the Talmud, Zohar, and other ancient rabbinic texts state explicitly that the “servant” of Isaiah 53 refers to the faithful of corporate Jewry¹⁶, the same sources frequently point to renowned saints of Israel as an archetype of the Suffering Servant. These virtuous individuals include saints such as Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, the messiah the son of Joseph and David – each of them embody perfect examples of God's servant, the righteous remnant of Israel.

Bear in mind that the rabbinic commentary on Isaiah 53 is not dualistic or multilateral. Meaning, the sages of old did **not** suggest

that Isaiah 53 refers to **either** the righteous remnant of Israel, Moses, Jeremiah, **or** an anointed leader. Rather, the servant in all four Servant Songs are the faithful descendants of Abraham. Isaiah 53 attests to an unprecedented worldwide repentance of all of mankind – a redemptive achievement accomplished by no other saint in history. Therefore, rabbinic commentators tend to lift up the messiah’s name more frequently than the names of other faithful servants of God.

While the bulk of rabbinic commentary seeks to provide the *pshat* – the principal analysis which illuminates the plain meaning of sacred literature – there is, broadly speaking, a second, and distinct stream of rabbinic commentary which explores the *drash*. In general terms, the *drash* delves into the deeply profound, yet often less precise homiletic method of exegesis used to interpret the Hebrew Scriptures. This sacred material is often referred to as *midrashic*, literally “derived from a *drash*.”

In Jewish thought, the *pshat* conveys the foundational understanding of any text in Tanach; this is the commentary which elucidates the clear and basic meaning of a verse. As the sages declare in the Talmud, “A verse cannot depart from its plain meaning.” (Shabbat 63a; Yev. 11b, 24a). Accordingly, the *midrashic* interpretation of a biblical verse is never intended to nullify, contradict, or injure the natural sense of a text. On the contrary, the *pshat* always supplies the primary meaning of a passage. Moreover, it is impossible to fully grasp the inspirational *midrashic* commentary without first comprehending the simple meaning of a text.

On the other hand, without the sublime illumination of the *Midrash*, seminal, seemingly-disconnected principles throughout various regions of Tanach can be challenging to harmonize and fully comprehend. In other words, with only the *pshat* commentary, Biblical principles when studied independently, can only be understood on a fundamental level. Yet the separate, straightforward commentaries of the *pshat* may appear incompatible and disjointed from other regions of scripture without the *midrashic* commentary. *Midrashic* literature, generally

speaking, weaves together and painstakingly merges Judaism's Written and Oral tradition into a transcendent revelation. Because the *Midrash* illuminates rabbinic thought to its fullest, holistic expression, it stands out as a vital tool for the student of sacred literature.

Few chapters in Tanach better illustrate the vital role the *Midrash* plays in expounding Biblical texts than Isaiah 53. The straightforward rabbinic approach to elucidate Isaiah 53 begins by identifying the astonished speakers in Isaiah 53:1-9 and the "Servant" in Isaiah 52:13 and 53:11. The rabbinic commentaries, i.e. the *pshat*, convey in clear and essential commentary how astonished the contrite kings of nations are when they discover that the faithful members of Israel are God's true servant. As mentioned, the identities of the speakers and the servant are evident from the surrounding chapters of Isaiah 53.

The *Midrash*, however, illuminates a most profound, yet often overlooked central theme of Isaiah 53; never before in history has any servant of God brought about the mass repentance of the gentiles. Whereas the patriarch Abraham redeemed only 70 souls in Haran, the future scion of the House of David will usher in an unprecedented epoch, where gentile kings of nations will repent, as vividly described in the fourth Servant Song. In other words, the messiah will bring about an age when the most important feature of Isaiah 53 will materialize – the worldwide repentance of the gentiles.

Whereas Moses drew only a single nation from Egypt into the service of God, the messianic king will redeem the other nations as well. At this epic, redemptive moment in the future all the nations will perceive that Judaism is the only true faith, as it is written:

“For then I will make the peoples pure of speech, so that they all invoke the name of the Lord and serve Him with one accord”(Zephaniah 3:9).

Thus, in the messianic age, the gentiles will cry aloud the remorseful and repentant words sketched in Isaiah 53. In essence, the sequence of events outlined in the fourth Servant Song will be

an unparalleled occasion in history. Never before throughout the annals of time have “the gentiles come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (Isaiah 60:3).

Consequently, although various rabbinic literature highlights numerous Biblical saints whose lives exemplify the Suffering Servant of Israel in Isaiah 53, the future messiah is held up more frequently and prominently than any other pious Jew in this startling context; for the future anointed Davidic king will usher in this dramatic epoch in which the gentiles will repent, as outlined in Isaiah 53. In other words, the stunning narrative of the fourth Servant Song will be made possible by the reign of the messiah, the foremost member of God’s Suffering Servant Israel. Only the messiah will accomplish this global achievement in the final redemption, which neither Abraham, Moses, or Jeremiah were able to accomplish. Only the messianic age will spawn worldwide repentance of the nations. Therefore, the rabbis teach, “‘My servant shall be high, and lifted up, and lofty exceedingly’ – he will be higher than Abraham, more exalted than Moses, loftier than the angels.” In short, the messiah will ignite the contrition of Israel’s neighbors as outlined in Isaiah’s fourth Servant Song.

Because of the deeply esoteric and widely elastic nature of *midrashic* writings, these millennia-old texts are vulnerable to misuse by opponents of the Jewish faith. Isaiah 53 – the chapter in the Bible which has for ages formed one of the principal battlefields between Jews and their Christian opponents – is no exception to this rule.

Under ordinary circumstances, traditional Church apologists regard rabbinic commentaries with sneering derision, casting them at best as damaging to spiritual enlightenment. However, ancient *midrashic* annotations on Isaiah 53 which can be ripped out of context and portrayed as supportive of Christian teachings are wildly quoted and cheerfully paraded by missionaries with the hope of winning more unclaimed souls to the Cross. The fact that the Christian interpretation of Isaiah 53 is not supported by the chapters that surround it, only adds to the Church’s desperate feeding frenzy on these ancient rabbinic texts. It is astonishing that

missionaries would use rabbinic texts to support Christian doctrines given that each and every one of the rabbis that they zealously quote utterly rejected the teachings of Christianity.

The most frequently quoted rabbinic text in Christian literature is, without doubt, the second-century Targum Yonatan ben Uziel on Isaiah 53. Although the word "*Targum*" literally means a "Translation," the Targum Yonatan ben Uziel is not at all a word-for-word translation of Tanach. Rather, this unique, highly-regarded Aramaic annotation on the Hebrew Scriptures fuses together both *drash* and *pshat* – the homiletic and plain meaning of a text – in its running, dynamic commentary on the Prophets. Accordingly, it is the messiah who is raised up as God's ideal servant in the Targum Yonatan ben Uziel on Isaiah 52:13, yet in the same commentary it is the faithful of the Jewish nation who vicariously suffer in Isaiah 52:14.

As expected, missionaries selectively quote the Targum Yonatan ben Uziel on Isaiah 52:13, which identifies God's servant as the messiah.

The Targum's rendering of Isaiah 52:13 is as follows:

"Behold my servant Messiah shall prosper; he shall be high, and increase, and be exceedingly strong."

Yet the Targum's commentary on the following verse, Isaiah 52:14, identifies Israel as the long-suffering and humiliated servant:

"As the house of Israel looked to him during many days, because their countenance was darkened among the peoples, and their complexion (darkened) beyond the sons of men."

As expected, the commentary of Targum Yonatan ben Uziel on Isaiah 52:14 is nowhere to be found in Christian missionary material. There is not a single church apologist who quotes the Targum's elucidation on Isaiah 53:10. For it is upon these words of Isaiah, "He is crushed and made ill," where the Targum identifies

the suffering servant as the nation of Israel who suffers unbearable chastisement in the following commentary:

“But it is the Lord’s good pleasure to refine and cleanse the remnant of His people in order to purify their souls from sin; they shall see the kingdom of the messiah, they shall increase their sons and daughters, they shall prolong their days; and those who perform the Law of the Lord shall prosper in good pleasure.”

Although the above quotation from Targum Yonatan ben Uziel on Isaiah 53:10 is deliberately ignored by Christendom’s missionaries, this two-millennia-old message remains immortal. The nation of Israel, God’s servant, suffered unimaginable torment at the hands of her gentile neighbors so that her sins would be washed away.

“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and declare to her: Her term of service is over, her iniquity is expiated; for she has received at the hand of the Lord double for all her sins.” (Isaiah 40:2)

Simply put, there are 15 verses in the Targum’s annotation on Isaiah 53 (52:13-15 and 53:1-12), yet with surgical precision, missionary conversionist tracts selectively and deliberately ignore almost all of them with the exception of the first verse on Isaiah 52:13. This is a well-worn technique of wielding rabbinic literature as an evangelical sledgehammer, in order to drive home the well-crafted message to unlettered Jews that ancient rabbis concealed the truth that Isaiah 53 is speaking of Jesus, and not the nation of Israel. Nothing, of course, could be further from the truth.

Footnotes:

1. *Midrash Rabbah* (Numbers XXIII.2), Zohar (Genesis, & Leviticus), Talmud (Brochos 5a), Rashi, Joseph Kara, Ibn Ezra, Joseph Kimchi, David Kimchi, Nachmanadies, Abarbinbanel, et all
2. Ibn Ezra on Isaiah 53
3. *Origen, Contra Celsum*, Chadwick, Henry; Cambridge Press, book 1, chapter 55, page 50
4. Isaiah 41:11; Micah 7:15-16; Jeremiah 16:19-20;

5. Isaiah 41:8-9; 43:10; 44:1; 44:21; 45:4; 48:20; 49:3
6. The New English Bible, Oxford Study Edition, page 788-789. See also the Revised Standard Bible, Oxford Study Edition, page 889.
7. Acts 8:28-34
8. Luke 22:37
9. John 12:38
10. I Peter 2:22
11. *The Christian New English Bible, Oxford Study Edition*, annotation on Isaiah 52:13-53:12 explains:

The “fourth Servant Song, the Suffering Servant, Israel, the servant of God, has suffered as a humiliated individual. However, the servant endured without complain because it was vicarious suffering (suffering for others). 52:13-15: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 verse 9),saying that the significance of Israel’s humiliation and exaltation is hard to believe (page 788-789). See also the Revised Standard Bible, Oxford Study Edition, page 889.

Walter Brueggemann Ph.D., *Isaiah 40 – 66* (Louisville: Kentucky, 1998), p.143, states:

“There is no doubt that Isaiah 53 is to be understood in the context of the Isaiah tradition. Insofar as the servant is Israel – a common assumption of Jewish interpretation – we see that the theme of humiliation and exaltation serves the Isaiah rendering of Israel, for Israel in this literature is exactly the humiliated (exiled) people who by the powerful intervention of Yahweh is about to become the exalted (restored) people of Zion. Thus the drama is the drama of Israel and more specifically of Jerusalem, the characteristic subject of this poetry.

Second, although it is clear that this poetry does not have Jesus in any first instance on its horizon, it is equally clear that the church, from the outset, has found the poetry a poignant and generative way to consider Jesus, wherein

humiliation equals crucifixion and exaltation equals resurrection and ascension.”

12. Talmud, Sotah 14a and the Sifri on Deuteronomy 355 applies Isaiah 53:12 to Moses
13. Rabbi Sadyah Gaon (tenth century), Oxford Ms. (Poc 32)
14. Jerusalem Talmud, Shkalim V.I.
15. Ezekiel 18:20-23
16. Midrash Rabbah (Numbers XXIII.2), Zohar (Genesis & Leviticus), Talmud (Brochos 5a),
17. Yalkut, ii, 571 on Zachariah 4:7