

Messianic Commentaries
from the Rabbis about
Isaiah 53

IS ISAIAH 53 TALKING ABOUT
ISRAEL OR THE MESSIAH?

Many Rabbis will Argue that
Isaiah 53 is about Israel

Let's find out???? WHAT THE
ANCIENT RABBINICAL
COMMENTARIES HAVE TO SAY
ABOUT CHAPTER 53 OF ISAIAH

Isaiah 52

13 ¶ Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. {deal...: or, prosper }

14 As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men:

15 So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider.

Isaiah 53

1 ¶ Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed? {report: or, doctrine?: Heb. hearing?}

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.

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. {we hid...: or, he hid as it were his face from us: Heb. as an hiding of faces from him, or, from us }

Isaiah 53

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.
{wounded: or, tormented} {stripes: Heb. bruise}

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. {laid...: Heb. made the iniquity of us all to meet on him}

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.

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.
{ from prison...: or, away by distress and
judgment: but, etc } { was he...: Heb. was the
stroke upon him }

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.
{ death: Heb. deaths }

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. {thou...: or, his soul shall make an offering }

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.

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.

Isaiah 53 is almost never read in the synagogues, as it is consistently neglected during the Haftorah readings. This is amazing in light of the fact that the chapters preceding and following Isaiah 53 are recited during these special readings. The following list illustrates this point:

Haftorah for Ekeb - Isaiah 49:14-51:3

Haftorah for Shofetim - Isaiah 51:12-52:12

Haftorah for Noah - Isaiah 54:1-55:5

Haftorah for Sephardi ritual - Isaiah 54:1-10

Haftorah for Hi Tetze - Isaiah 54:1-10

Haftorah for Re'eh - Isaiah 54:11-55:5

Herbert Lowe, a Cambridge University Rabbinics Professor notes: “Quotations from the famous 53rd chapter of Isaiah are rare in the Rabbinic literature. Because of the Christological interpretation given to the chapter by Christians, it is omitted from the series of prophetic lessons (HAFTORAH) for the Deuteronomy Sabbaths. **The omission is deliberate and striking.**”
(Schwarz, “Dear Rabbi,” p.16)

It should also be pointed out that the Haftorah readings are the same throughout synagogues and temples all over the world.

NOTE ABOUT ISAIAH 53 AND RABBI RASHI

In order to avoid the obvious Christian implications, rabbis such as Rashi (Rabbi Solomon Izaak, circa 1040-1105 A. D.) referred this passage to the sufferings of the nation of Israel, despite the fact that rabbis such as the great Maimonides and Crispin thought it was wrong to apply this to Israel. They rather maintained the belief that this passage of Scripture was about Messiah. The reason for Rashi's attempt to make Israel the central focus of this passage was due to his seemingly anti-Christian bias, a fact to which he freely admitted:

The Targum

Behold, My Servant the Messiah shall prosper.

-- Targum ("Targum Jonathan") to Isaiah 52:13, various editions (such as Samson H. Levey, The Messiah: An Aramaic Interpretation; the Messianic Exegesis of the Targum." Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1974, p. 63).

In the early cycle of synagogue readings

We know that messianic homilies based on Joseph's career (his saving role preceded by suffering), and using Isaiah 53 as the prophetic portion, were preached in certain old synagogues which used the triennial cycle...

-- Rav Asher Soloff, "The Fifty Third Chapter of Isaiah According to the Jewish Commentators, to the Sixteenth Century" (Ph.D. Thesis, Drew University, 1967), p. 146.

The addition of 53.4-5 [to the cycle of synagogue readings] was evidently of a Messianic purport by reason of the theory of a suffering Messiah. The earlier part of [the Haftarah] (52.7ff.) dealt with the redemption of Israel, and in this connection the tribulations of the Messiah were briefly alluded to by the recital of the above 2 verses.

-- Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue* (NY: Ktav, 1971, © 1940), p. 298.

Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98b

The Rabbis said: His name is "the leper scholar," as it is written, Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him a leper, smitten of God, and afflicted. [Isaiah 53:4].

-- Soncino Talmud edition.

Ruth Rabbah 5:6

The fifth interpretation [of Ruth 2:14] makes it refer to the Messiah. Come hither: **approach to royal state**. And eat of the **BREAD** refers to the bread of royalty; **AND DIP THY MORSEL IN THE VINEGAR** refers to his sufferings, as it is said, **But he was wounded because of our transgressions.** (Isa. LIII, 5).

-- Soncino Midrash Rabbah (vol. 8, p. 64).

There is a remarkable passage in the very old book *Pesikta*, cited in the treatise *Abkath Rokhel*, and reprinted in *Hulsii Theologia Judaica*, where this passage occurs, p. 309:

When Elohim created the world, He stretched out His hand under the throne of His kavod, and brought forth the being of the Messiah. He said to him: 'Will you heal and redeem My sons after 6000 years?' He answered him, 'I will.' Then Elohim said to him: 'Will you then also bear the punishment in order to blot out their sins, as it is written, "But he bore our diseases" (Yeshayahu 53:4). And the Messiah answered Him; 'I will joyfully bear them' (cf. Zohar, 2:212a).

Rabbi Moses Haddarshan states:

Immediately the Messiah, out of love,
took upon himself all those plagues
and sufferings, as it is written in
Yeshayahu 53, 'He was abused and
oppressed.' "

The Karaite Yefeth ben Ali (10th c.)

As to myself, I am inclined, with Benjamin of Nehawend, to regard it as alluding to the Messiah, and as opening with a description of his condition in exile, from the time of his birth to his accession to the throne: for the prophet begins by speaking of his being seated in a position of great honor, and then goes back to relate all that will happen to him during the captivity. He thus gives us to understand two things: In the first instance, that the Messiah will only reach his highest degree of honor after long and severe trials; and secondly, that these trials will be sent upon him as a kind of sign, so that, if he finds himself under the yoke of misfortunes whilst remaining pure in his actions, he may know that he is the desired one....

-- S. R. Driver and A. Neubauer, editors, *The Fifty-third Chapter of Isaiah According to the Jewish Interpreters* (2 volumes; New York: Ktav, 1969), pp. 19-20. The English translations used here are taken from volume 2. The original texts are in volume 1. Cf. Soloff, pp. 107-

Another statement from Yefeth ben Ali:

By the words "**surely he hath carried our sicknesses,**" they mean that the pains and sickness which he fell into were merited by them, but that he bore them instead. . . . And here I think it necessary to pause for a few moments, in order to explain why God caused these sicknesses to attach themselves to the Messiah for the sake of Israel. . . .

The nation deserved from God greater punishment than that which actually came upon them, but not being strong enough to bear it. . . . God appoints his servant to carry their sins, and by doing so lighten their punishment in order that Israel might not be completely exterminated.

-- Driver and Neubauer, pp. 23 ff.; Soloff pp. 108-109.

Another statement from Yefeth ben Ali:

"And the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all." The prophet does not by avon mean iniquity, but punishment for iniquity, as in the passage, "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Num. xxxii. 23).

-- Driver and Neubauer, p. 26; Soloff p. 109.

Mysteries of R. Shim'on ben Yohai (midrash, date uncertain)

And Armilauus will join battle with Messiah, the son of Ephraim, in the East gate . . .; and Messiah, the son of Ephraim, will die there, and Israel will mourn for him. And afterwards the Holy One will reveal to them Messiah, the son of David, whom Israel will desire to stone, saying, Thou speakest falsely; already is the Messiah slain, and there is non other Messiah to stand up (after him): and so they will despise him, as it is written, "Despised and forlorn of men;" but he will turn and hide himself from them, according to the words, "Like one hiding his face from us."

-- Driver and Neubauer, p. 32, citing the edition of Jellinek, *Beth ha-Midrash* (1855), part iii. p. 80.

Lekach Tov (11th c. midrash)

"And let his [Israel's] kingdom be exalted,"
in the days of the Messiah, of whom it is
said, "Behold my servant shall prosper; he
will be high and exalted, and lofty
exceedingly."

-- **Driver and Neubauer, p. 36.**

Maimonides, Letter to Yemen (12th c.)

What is to be the manner of Messiah's advent, and where will be the place of his appearance? . . . And Isaiah speaks similarly of the time when he will appear, without his father or mother of family being known, He came up as a sucker before him, and as a root out of the dry earth, etc. But the unique phenomenon attending his manifestation is, that all the kings of the earth will be thrown into terror at the fame of him

-- their kingdoms will be in consternation, and they themselves will be devising whether to oppose him with arms, or to adopt some different course, confessing, in fact, their inability to contend with him or ignore his presence, and so confounded at the wonders which they will see him work, that they will lay their hands upon their mouth; in the words of Isaiah, when describing the manner in which the kings will hearken to him, At him kings will shut their mouth; for that which had not been told them have they seen, and that which they had not heard they have perceived.

-- Driver and Neubauer vol 1: p. 322. Edition is Abraham S. Halkin, ed., Igeret Teman (NY: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1952). See Soloff pp. 127-128.

Zohar II, 212a (medieval)

There is in the Garden of Eden a palace named the Palace of the Sons of Sickness. This palace the Messiah enters, and He summons every pain and every chastisement of Israel. All of these come and rest upon Him. And had He not thus lightened them upon Himself, there had been no man able to bear Israel's chastisements for the transgressions of the law; as it is written, "Surely our sicknesses he has carried."

-- Cited in Driver and Neubauer, pp. 14-15 from section "va-yiqqahel".
Translation from Frydland, Rachmiel, *What the Rabbis Know About the Messiah* (Cincinnati: Messianic Literature Outreach, 1991), p. 56, n. 27. Note that this section is not found in the Soncino edition which says that it was an interpolation.

Nachmanides (R. Moshe ben Nachman) (13th c.)

The right view respecting this Parashah is to suppose that by the phrase "my servant" the whole of Israel is meant. . . .As a different opinion, however, is adopted by the Midrash, which refers it to the Messiah, it is necessary for us to explain it in conformity with the view there maintained. The prophet says, The Messiah, the son of David of whom the text speaks, will never be conquered or perish by the hands of his enemies. And, in fact the text teaches this clearly. . . .

And by his stripes we were healed -- because the stripes by which he is vexed and distressed will heal us; God will pardon us for his righteousness, and we shall be healed both from our own transgressions and from the iniquities of our fathers.

-- Driver and Neubauer, pp. 78 ff.

Yalkut ii: 571 (13th c.)

Who art thou, O great mountain (Zech. iv. 7.) This refers to the King Messiah. And why does he call him "the great mountain?" Because he is greater than the patriarchs, as it is said, "My servant shall be high, and lifted up, and lofty exceedingly" -- he will be higher than Abraham, . . . lifted up above Moses, . . . loftier than the ministering angels.

-- Driver and Neubauer, p. 9.

The same passage is found in Midrash Tanhuma to Genesis (perhaps 9th c.), ed. John T. Townsend (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1989), p. 166.

Yalkut ii. 620 (13th c.), in regard to Psalm 2:6

I have drawn him out of the chastisements. . .

.The chastisements are divided into three parts: one for David and the fathers, one for our own generation, and one for the King Messiah; and this is that which is written, "**He was wounded for our transgressions,**" etc.

-- Driver and Neubauer, p. 10.

R. Mosheh Kohen ben Crispin (14th c.)

This Parashah the commentators agree in explaining of the Captivity of Israel, although the singular number is used in it throughout. . . .As there is no cause constraining us to do so, why should we here interpret the word collectively, and thereby distort the passage from its natural sense? . . . As then it seemed to me that the doors of the literal interpretation of the Parashah were shut in their face, and that "they wearied themselves to find the entrance," having forsaken the knowledge of our Teachers, and inclined after the "stubbornness of their own hearts," and of their own opinion, I am pleased to interpret it, in accordance with the teaching of our Rabbis, **of the King Messiah**, and will be careful, so far as I am able, to adhere to the literal sense.

-- Driver and Neubauer, pp. 99-100.

*Another comment from R. Mosheh Kohen
ben Crispin*

If his soul makes itself into a trespass-offering,
implying that his soul will treat itself as guilty,
and so receive punishment for our trespasses and
transgressions.

-- Driver and Neubauer, p. 112.

R. Sh'lomoh Astruc (14th c.)

My servant shall prosper, or be truly intelligent, because by intelligence man is really man -- it is intelligence which makes a man what he is. And the prophet calls the King Messiah my servant, speaking as one who sent him. Or he may call the whole people my servant, as he says above my people (lii. 6): when he speaks of the people, the King Messiah is included in it; and when he speaks of the King Messiah, the people is comprehended with him. What he says then is, that my servant the King Messiah will prosper.

-- Driver and Neubauer, p. 129.

R. Elijah de Vidas (16th c.)

Since the Messiah bears our iniquities which produce the effect of His being bruised, it follows that whoso will not admit that the Messiah thus suffers for our iniquities, must endure and suffer for them himself.

-- Driver and Neubauer, p. 331.

**Rabbi Moshe Alshekh (El-Sheikh) of
Sefad (16th c.)**

**I may remark, then, that our Rabbis with
one voice accept and affirm the opinion
that the prophet is speaking of the King
Messiah, and we ourselves also adhere to
the same view.**

-- Driver and Neubauer, p. 258.

Herz Homberg (18th-19th c.)

The fact is, that it refers to the King Messiah, who will come in the latter days, when it will be the Lord's good pleasure to redeem Israel from among the different nations of the earth.... Whatever he underwent was in consequence of their own transgression, the Lord having chosen him to be a trespass-offering, like the scape-goat which bore all the iniquities of the house of Israel.
-- Driver and Neubauer, p. 400-401.

The musaf (additional) service for the Day of Atonement, Philips machzor (20th c.)

Our righteous anointed is departed from us: horror hath seized us, and we have none to justify us. He hath borne the yoke of our iniquities, and our transgression, and is wounded because of our transgression. He beareth our sins on his shoulder, that he may find pardon for our iniquities. We shall be healed by his wound, at the time that the Eternal will create him (the Messiah) as a new creature. O bring him up from the circle of the earth. Raise him up from Seir, to assemble us the second time on Mount Lebanon, by the hand of Yinnon. (Messiah)

-- A. Th. Philips, *Machzor Leyom Kippur / Prayer Book for the Day of Atonement with English Translation; Revised and Enlarged Edition* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1931), p. 239. The passage can also be found in, e.g., the 1937 edition. Also, Driver and Neubauer, p. 399.

Soncino Zohar, Shemoth, Section 2, Page 212a

When the Messiah hears of the great suffering of Israel in their dispersion, and of the wicked amongst them who seek not to know their Master, he weeps aloud on account of those wicked ones amongst them, as it is written: But he was wounded because of our transgression, he was crushed because of our iniquities'(ISA.: LIII, 5).

Isa.53[5] But he (Messiah)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.

Soncino Zohar, Shemoth, Section 2, Page 212a

The souls then return to their place. The Messiah, on his part, enters a certain Hall in the Garden of Eden, called the Hall of the Afflicted. There he calls for all the diseases and pains and sufferings of Israel, bidding them settle on himself, which they do. And were it not that he thus eases the burden from Israel, taking it on himself, no one could endure the sufferings meted out to Israel in expiation on account of their neglect of the Torah. So Scripture says; Surely our diseases he did bear,' etc. (Ibid. LIII, 4).

(Steve Schwarz, “Dear Rabbi,” p.15)

“Since Christians interpret Isaiah 53 as being a prophecy concerning Jesus, we maintain that this is a prophecy concerning the people of Israel.”

Ninth century poet, Eliazer Hakalir

paraphrases Isaiah 53 in a prayer that comprises a part of some Jewish sects' traditional liturgical prayers recited on Yom Kippur (the Jewish Day of Atonement). The prayer begins: “We are shrunk up in our misery even until now! Our Rock hath not come nigh to us; Messiah our righteousness, hath turned from us; we are in terror, and there is none to justify us! Our iniquities and the yoke of our transgressions He will bear, for He was wounded for our transgressions; He will carry our sins upon His shoulder, that we may find forgiveness for our iniquities; and by his strips we are healed ...”

(Baron, Rays of Messiah's Glory, pp. 225-230)

(Baron, Rays of Messiahs Glory, pp. 225-229)

“... the weight of Jewish authority preponderates in favor of the Messianic interpretation of this chapter... that until recent times this prophecy has been almost universally received by Jews as referring to Messiah is evident from Targum Jonathan who introduces Messiah by name in chp. LII.13; from the Talmud (Sanhedrin vol. 98b); and from the Zohar... In fact, until Rabbi Rashi [Rabbi Solomon Izaak (1040-1105)], considered the originator of the modern school of Jewish interpretation], who applied it to the Jewish nation, **the Messianic interpretation of this chapter was almost universally adopted by Jews...**”

The story then concludes with a quotation from Isaiah 53:5: “... he was wounded for our transgressions.”

(Patai, The Messiah Texts, p.115)

And, “And the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.” **The prophet does not say avon meaning iniquity, but punishment from iniquity, as in the passage, “Be sure your sin will find you out.”**

(Num. Xxxii. 23) (Ibid., p. 26)

Maimonides himself affirmed the messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53. (Ibid., vol.1, p. 322)

Finally, the idea that God would place the sins of Israel upon an innocent man is alluded to in this Midrash: Moses spake before the Holy One, blessed be he, ‘Will not a time come upon when Israel will have neither Tabernacle nor Temple? What will happen to them (as regards atonement)?’ He replied, **‘I will take a righteous man from amongst them and make him a pledge on their account, and I will atone for their iniquities.’**
(Midrash on Exodus 35:4)

Ibn Kaspi (1280-1340 A.D.),

an ardent admirer of Maimonides, and "a gifted fanatic for philosophic thought" (Gratz vii, 340-345), wanted to abandon the gloss altogether, and said "that those who expounded the section of the messiah gave occasion to the heretics to interpret it of Jesus." Passani objected to bringing the messiah into the text; and says that "Scripture never bears any meaning other than the simple and natural meaning; a different supposition would not allow us to reply to the Epicureans (i.e., the Christians).

This new interpretation, emphasizing Israel's suffering, began with Rashi. Rashi's authority is put forward by some who followed him, with Ibn Ezra, J. and D. Kimchi, who were later than he; but no one before him. His great Talmudical studies, which seem to have been his earliest occupation, did not suggest it. On the contrary, in his notes on the Talmud he followed the older tradition. In the graphic story in which Joshua ben Levi is reported to have made diverse inquiries of Elisha and Shimon ben Yohai as to the coming of the messiah, and was told that he would find the messiah sitting at the gates of Rome among the poor who bare sicknesses, Rashi explains the words "bearers of sicknesses" by reference to this section of Isaiah. "' Bearers of sicknesses', in other words, stricken; and he too is stricken, as it is written, 'And he was wounded for our iniquities,' and it is written, 'And our sicknesses he bare'."

ZOHAR

At the time when the Holy One desires to atone for the sins of the world, like a physician who to save the other limbs, bleeds the arm, he smites their arm and heals their whole person, as it is written, "*He was wounded for our iniquities*", etc.

YOSEPH ALBO

Sometimes, too, misfortunes light upon the righteous not as a punishment, but for the sake of a whole nation, that atonement might be made for it. This is because the Almighty takes pleasure in the preservation of the world, and knows that the righteous will bear his sufferings cheerfully, without quarreling with any of his attributes. He therefore brings sufferings upon the just, as a satisfaction for the evil [otherwise] destined to afflict a whole people, in order that it may be thus averted. This is what our rabbis mean by their saying (Moed Katan 28a), "*The death of the righteous works atonement*".