

Rabbinic Views of Messiah and Isaiah 53

The Paradox

Anyone who sets himself to the task of seeking to know what the Old Testament has to say about the coming of the Messiah soon finds himself involved with a seeming paradox. At times one even seems to be faced with an outright contradiction, for the Jewish prophets gave a twofold picture of the Messiah who was to come.

On the one hand, the inquirer will find numerous predictions regarding the Messiah which portray Him as One who is going to suffer humiliation, physical harm, and finally death in a violent manner. This death was stated by the Jewish prophets to be a substitutionary death for the sins of the Jewish people. On the other hand, he will find that the Jewish prophets also spoke of the Messiah coming as a conquering king who will destroy the enemies of Israel and set up the Messianic Kingdom of peace and prosperity.

This is the twofold picture the Jewish prophets gave of the Messiah. For centuries past, during the formulation of the *Talmud*, our rabbis made serious studies of messianic prophecies. They came up with this conclusion: *The prophets spoke of two different Messiahs.*

The Messiah who was to come, suffer and die was termed Messiah, the Son of Joseph, *Mashiach ben Yoseph*. The second Messiah, who would then come following the first, was termed Messiah, the Son of David, *Mashiach ben David*. This one would raise the first Messiah back to life, and establish the Messianic Kingdom of peace on earth. That the Old Testament presents these two lines of messianic prophecy was something all the early rabbis recognized. The Old Testament never clearly states that there will be two Messiahs. In fact, many of the paradoxical descriptions are found side by side in the same passages in which, it seems, that only one person is meant. But for the early rabbis the two-Messiahs theory seemed to be the best answer.

For centuries Orthodox Judaism held the concept of two Messiahs. Since the Talmudic period, however, in the history of the Jewish people, the Son of David alone was played up in the imaginations of Jewish hearts and minds. The other messianic figure, Messiah, the Son of Joseph, the suffering one, was ignored. He was there in Jewish theology when needed to explain the suffering Messiah passages contained in the Old Testament. His existence provided an escape clause when thorny questions were raised. Otherwise, this messianic figure was largely ignored. Today, few Jews have heard of Him or know of His existence in Jewish theology of days gone by. The One that Jews today know of is the One who is to conquer: Messiah, the Son of David.

The Source of the Paradox

One of the major sources from which the rabbis developed their concept of the suffering Messiah, the Son of Joseph, was Isaiah 53. The present-day bone of contention regarding what the Old Testament says about the Messiah centers on this chapter. The passage speaks of a servant, the Servant of Jehovah. This Servant undergoes a great deal of suffering, ending in death. The chapter goes on to state that this suffering is a vicarious suffering, that the death is a substitutionary death for sin;

He is suffering and dying for the sins of others. The passage goes on to indicate that this Servant is resurrected. The bone of contention is not so much over *what* the passage says, but of *whom* it speaks.

The question today concerns of whom Isaiah was speaking. Did he prophesy concerning the Messiah here? Rabbis say that this is the *Christian* interpretation of this passage and not the *Jewish* one. The *Jewish* interpretation, they would say, is that Isaiah is speaking about the people of Israel, the Jewish people suffering in the Gentile world. This is *the Jewish* interpretation, the rabbis would say – and it does not speak of the Messiah at all.

But to make the passage speak of the collective body of Israel seems almost to force an interpretation. Taken by itself, the passage seems to have only one individual in mind.

Rabbinic Interpretations of Isaiah 53

But is this conflict merely between the Jewish interpretation and the Christian one? The history of Judaism shows otherwise. The interpretation that Isaiah 53 is referring to the Jewish people is really a recent one. The original interpretation of Isaiah 53 by Jewish rabbis has been that it is speaking of an individual – the Messiah Himself. In fact, the concept of Messiah, the Son of Joseph, comes from this passage. But for a clearer idea of what the old Jewish view of Isaiah 53 was, it would be good to turn to history.

Among the earliest *Targums* are those of Jonathan ben Uzziel dating from the first century A.D. His *Targums* on this passage of Isaiah begin with these words: "Behold my servant Messiah shall prosper..."¹ The *Targums* of Jonathan ben Uzziel were heavily quoted by the early rabbis and he was certainly considered an authority on the Jewish view of Scripture. He definitely considered the Isaiah passage to speak of Messiah. Jonathan ben Uzziel could hardly be accused of adopting the *Christian* interpretation. That Jonathan ben Uzziel was not alone in this interpretation becomes clear from a quotation from Rabbi Don Yitzchak Abarbanel from about 1500. While he himself did not accept the view that the Isaiah passage referred to the Messiah, he makes a dramatic admission:

The first question is to ascertain to whom (this Scripture) refers: for the learned among the Nazarenes expound it of the man who was crucified in Jerusalem at the end of the second Temple and who, according to them, was the Son of God and took flesh in the virgin's womb, as is stated in their writings. But Yonathan ben Uzziel interprets it in the *Targum* of the future Messiah; and this is also the opinion of our own learned men in the majority of their *Midrashim*... (italics added).²

In spite of Abarbanel's personal view regarding this passage, he freely admits that the majority of the rabbis of the *Midrashim* took the passage to speak of the Messiah. He thus points out that Jonathan ben Uzziel was not alone in his opinion, but rather this was *the Jewish* view of the period of the *Targumim* and the *Midrashim*.

The *Zohar*, thought to have been written either by Simon bar Yochai in the second century or by a Spanish rabbi in the thirteenth century, makes certain statements which have obvious references to the Isaiah passage:

There is in the garden of Eden a palace called the Palace of the sons of sickness: this palace the Messiah then enters, and summons every sickness, every pain, and every chastisement of Israel; they all come and rest upon him. And were it not that he had thus lightened them off Israel and taken them upon himself, there had been no man able to bear Israel's chastisements for transgression of the law: and this is that which is written, "Surely our sicknesses he hath carried."³

The *Zohar* in this quotation quotes from Isaiah 53:4 and referred the passage to the Messiah Himself. The passage further makes Israel distinct from the One referred to in the Isaiah passage. Furthermore, the *Zohar* recognizes the vicariousness and substitutional element in the passage – the Messiah is taking upon Himself the suffering due to Israel for their sins.

More evidence from within the same period is provided by the *Babylonian Talmud*: “The Messiah—what is his name? ... those of the house of Rabbi Yuda the Saint say, ‘The sick one,’ as it is said, ‘Surely he hath borne our sicknesses’” (Sanhedrin 98b).⁴

Like the *Zohar*, the *Babylonian Talmud* also took the Isaiah passage to refer to the Messiah. Verse 4 is specifically applied to the person of the Messiah Himself.

In *Midrash Tanhumi* we find:

Rabbi Nahman says, The word “man” in the passage ... refers to the Messiah, the son of David, as it is written, “Behold the man whose name is Zemah”; where Yonathan interprets, Behold the man Messiah; and so it is said, “A man of pains and known to sickness.”⁵

The *Sepher Ha-Gilgalim* sees Isaiah 52:13 as referring to “King Messiah” and says of Him:

“He shall be high and exalted etc.,” or, as our Rabbis say, “He shall be higher than Abraham, exceedingly above Adam!”⁶

The *Midrash Cohen*, when dealing with Isaiah 53:5, puts the following words in the mouth of Elijah the prophet. Elijah says to Messiah:

“Bear thou the sufferings and wounds wherewith the Almighty doth chastise thee for Israel’s sin;” and so it is written, ‘He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities’ until the time when the end should come.⁷

Another *Midrash* on this same passage states: “All the sufferings are divided into three parts. One part goes to David and the Patriarchs, another to the generation of the rebellion [rebellious Israel] and the third to King Messiah.”⁸

Another volume that takes the Isaiah passage to refer to the Messiah is the *Mahsor* or the Prayer Book for the Day of Atonement. One of the many prayers found in this volume is called the *Musaf* Prayer. It was written by Rabbi Eliezer Kalir around the seventh century A.D. Part of the prayer reads as follows:

Messiah our righteousness 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.⁹

The more this *Yom Kippur* prayer is studied, the more interesting it becomes. The prayer voices fear that the Messiah has departed from the people, which assumes that Messiah had already come to them and has left them. Furthermore, the Messiah who has departed has suffered vicariously for the people, the sins of the people having been placed on this Messiah. Now, after suffering, the Messiah has departed from them; this is the cause of their consternation. Now, the people pray for the Messiah to come back a second time. Much of this prayer is a direct quotation from the Isaiah passage. This shows, therefore, that even as late as the seventh century, the Jewish view was still that this passage had reference to the Messiah.

That this view was still the dominant one among Jewry in the tenth century is seen from the commentary of Yepheth ben ‘Ali:

As to myself, I am inclined, with Benjamin of Nehawend, to regard it as alluding to the Messiah ... He (the prophet) 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 while remaining pious in his actions, he may know that he is the designated one. ... The expression "my servant" is applied to the Messiah as it is applied to his ancestor in the verse, "I have sworn to David my servant."¹⁰

This rabbi, too, recognized the passage to be in reference to the Messiah. He makes the point in accordance with the passage that the Messiah will reach His high state of glory by means of suffering.

Jews in the eleventh century also considered the passage to speak of the Messiah. The *Bereshith Rabbah* of Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan states that the Holy One gave Messiah the opportunity to save souls, but to be severely chastised. We then find these words:

...and forthwith the Messiah accepted the chastisements of love, as it is written, "He was oppressed, and he was afflicted." ... And when Israel is sinful, the Messiah seeks for mercy upon them, as it is written, "By his stripes we were healed," and, "He carried the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."¹¹

By quoting from Isaiah 53, verses 7, 5, and 12 respectively, the *Bereshith Rabbah* draws certain conclusions. One is that the Messiah will save many, but that this salvation of the many is accomplished by means of His suffering. Second, the Messiah's sufferings are viewed to be vicarious in nature, for He is seen as suffering for the sins of Israel.

Another rabbi from the eleventh century, Rabbi Tobiyyah ben Eliezer, in his *Lechah Tova* has this to say about Isaiah 52:13: "And let his 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."¹²

Among the most famous rabbis of this period was Moses ben Maimon, better known as Maimonides or the Rambam. In his writings he, too, makes the Isaiah passage refer to the Messiah:

What is to be the manner of Messiah's advent, ... there shall rise up one of whom none have known before, and the signs and wonders which they shall see performed by him will be the proofs of his true origin. ... And Isaiah speaks...of the time when he will appear, without his father or mother or 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 ... 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."¹³

The Rambam quotes from Isaiah 53:2 and 52:15 respectively, and refers these passages to the Messiah's person. This is his view regarding the entire passage.

Also from the eleventh century, an ancient Jewish writing states concerning the Messiah:

...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 so they will despise him, as it is written, "Despised and forlorn of men..."¹⁴

The writer presents the Two Messiahs view which was the common Jewish view of his day. One Messiah, the Son of Ephraim or Joseph, will die. After his death will come the Messiah, the Son of David whom, the rabbi says, Israel will reject. He quotes from Isaiah 53:3 to prove his point.

During this time, we have for the first time in the history of Jewish theology, the idea that this passage was not in reference to the Messiah but in reference to the people of Israel. It was first propounded by Rabbi Shlomo Yizchaki, better known as Rashi.¹⁵ But since he went contrary to the traditional Jewish view concerning this passage, there was an immediate reaction by other Jewish authorities.

One rabbi who reacted against the new view propounded by Rashi was Rabbi Moshe Kohen Ibn Crispin of Cordova and Toledo in Spain at about 1350:

...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: thus, possibly, I shall be free from the forced and far-fetched interpretations of which others have been guilty.

...This prophecy was delivered by Isaiah at the divine command for the purpose of making known to us something about the nature of the future Messiah, who is to come and deliver Israel, and his life for the day when he arrives at discretion until his advent as a redeemer, in order that if any one should arise claiming to be himself the Messiah, we may reflect, and look to see whether we can observe in him any resemblance to the traits described here: if there is any such resemblance, then we may believe that he is the Messiah our righteousness; but if not, we cannot do so.¹⁶

The "forced and far-fetched" interpretation that Rabbi Crispin has reference to is the interpretation of Rashi; that this does not refer to the Messiah but to the people of Israel. This rabbi reacts against this interpretation and insists that this Isaiah passage refers to Messiah; that it was written for the purpose of helping identify the Messiah so that He can be recognized when He comes.

In the sixteenth century we have the words of Rabbi Saadyah Ibn Danan of Grenada, c. 1500:

One of these, Rabbi Joseph ben Kaspi, was led so far as to say that those who expounded it of the Messiah, who is shortly to be revealed, gave occasion to the heretics to interpret it of Jesus. May God, however, forgive him for not having spoken the truth! Our Rabbis, the doctors of the Thalmud, deliver their opinions by the power of prophecy, possessing a tradition concerning the principles of interpretation ... alludes covertly to the King Messiah.¹⁷

This Rabbi also reacts against the interpretation that the Isaiah passage refers to the people of Israel. He demands that Jewish interpreters return to the Talmudic interpretation that this refers to the Messiah. He also helps to shed some light as to the reason why many were switching over to the new view. It was during this period that many debates broke out between rabbis and Christians, and the latter used Isaiah 53 to show that Jesus was the Messiah. Because of the force of their arguments, as a defense rabbis began to refer the passage to Israel.

Also from the second half of the sixteenth century are the writings of Rabbi Moshe Le Sheich, or Al Shech, who was a disciple of Joseph Caro, author of the *Shulchan Aruch*. He, too, demanded that all Jewish interpreters return to the more traditional interpretation when he wrote: "...our Rabbis with one voice accept and affirm the opinion that the prophet is speaking of the King Messiah, and we shall ourselves also adhere to the same view..."¹⁸

The writings of Rabbi Eliyyah de Vidas are from about the same time. He wrote the following c. 1575 concerning Isaiah 53:5:

"But he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities," the meaning of which is that 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.¹⁹

This rabbi, too, refers the passage to the Messiah and states that the Messiah will suffer vicariously, for He suffers for the sins of the people. The Rabbi goes on to say that those who refuse to believe and accept the vicarious suffering for sin which the Messiah bore are doomed, according to the passage, to suffer for their own sins.

Even in the seventeenth century there was still reaction against Rashi's interpretation of the Isaiah passage, as the writing of Rabbi Naphtali ben Asher Altschuler (c. 1650) shows: "I will now proceed to explain these verses of our own Messiah, who, God willing, will come speedily in our days! I am surprised that Rashi and Rabbi David Kimchi have not, with the Targum, applied them to the Messiah likewise."²⁰

By the nineteenth century, the new view propounded by Rashi and followed by Rabbi David Kimchi had pretty well won over the older view of the rabbis. But the victory was not total, for there was still a reaction against it. Herz Homburg, in his *Korem*, written in 1818, wrote: "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."²¹

To interpret Isaiah 53 as speaking of Messiah is not non-Jewish. In fact, if we are to speak of the *traditional* Jewish interpretation, it would be that the passage speaks of the Messiah. The first one to expound the view that this referred to Israel rather than the Messiah was Shlomo Yizchaki, better known as Rashi (c. 1040–1105). He was followed by David Kimchi (1160–1235). But this was to go contrary to all rabbinic teaching of that day and of the preceding one thousand years. Today, Rashi's view has become dominant in Jewish and rabbinic theology. But that is not *the* Jewish view. Nor is it the *traditional* Jewish view. Those closer to the time of the original writings, and who had less contact with the Christian apologists, interpreted it as speaking of the Messiah.

¹ *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah According to the Jewish Interpreters* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc. 1969) p. 5.

² *Ibid.*, p. 153.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

⁸ *Midrash Tehillim* on Psalm 2:7 and *Midrash Samuel* 19.

⁹ *Prayer Book for the Day of Atonement* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1931) p. 239.

¹⁰ *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah According to the Jewish Interpreters* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc. 1969) pp. 19–20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 374–375.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 37–39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 99–102.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 400.