

The Gospel According to Isaiah 53

ENCOUNTERING THE
SUFFERING SERVANT IN JEWISH
AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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2

JEWISH INTERPRETATIONS OF ISAIAH 53

MICHAEL L. BROWN

It was the celebrated biblical and Semitic scholar Franz Delitzsch who once exclaimed of Isaiah 53,

How many are there whose eyes have been opened when reading this "golden passion of the Old Testament evangelist," as Polycarp the Lysian calls it! In how many an Israelite has it melted the crust of his heart! It looks as if it had been written beneath the cross upon Golgotha, and was illuminated by the heavenly brightness of the full *sheb limini* שֵׁב לְיָמִי ("sit at my right hand"). It is the unravelling of Psalm 22 and Psalm 110. It forms the outer centre of this wonderful book of consolation (ch. 40–66), and is the most central, the deepest, and the loftiest thing that the Old Testament prophecy, outstripping itself, has ever achieved.¹

In contrast with this soaring appraisal, the Jews for Judaism counter-missionary Web site lists no less than twenty-seven objections to the application of this passage to Jesus,² while the Orthodox Jewish

1. *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* (New Updated Edition, Electronic Database. 1996, Hendrickson Publishers), to Isaiah 52:13.

2. See, e.g., www.jewsforjudaism.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=137&Itemid=211. All these objections are excerpted from Gerald Sigal's monograph, see n. 3, immediately below.

counter-missionary Gerald Sigal devoted 287 pages to his attempt to refute the Christocentric interpretation.³ How differently this foundational text is viewed by two sets of readers! On this much, however, both sides agree (as attested to by Sigal's volume alone): Isaiah 53 is *the* central prophetic text in the debate concerning Jesus the Messiah.

It will be the purpose of this chapter to summarize the main lines of traditional Jewish interpretation of Isaiah 53, with special reference to the objections to Jesus that arise from the text, offering concise responses to these objections and then suggesting a way to utilize these traditional commentaries redemptively.

Before getting into the heart of this chapter, let me briefly recap some of the messianic interpretations of Isaiah 53 in rabbinic literature:

1. Targum Jonathan interprets Isaiah 53 with reference to the Messiah, but with a fairly radical reworking of the text, emphasizing the Messiah's victory rather than his suffering, and with some application of the text to the nation of Israel as a whole.⁴
2. The Talmud refers Isaiah 53:4 to the Messiah in Sanhedrin 98b, as rendered in the Soncino translation, "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."⁵
3. Ruth Rabbah interprets 53:5 with reference to the Messiah⁶
4. Midrash Tanchuma applies both 52:13, speaking of the servant's

3. Gerald Sigal, *Isaiah 53: Who Is the Servant?* (n.p.: Xlibris, 2007). For other counter-missionary attacks, see www.messiahtruth.com/haftorah.html (dealing with why Isaiah 53 is not included in the annual cycle of readings in the synagogue); www.messiahtruth.com/targum.html (dealing with the Targum to Isaiah 53); www.messiahtruth.com/targum.html (dealing with Isaiah 53 in the Zohar).

4. Cf. the discussion in Samson H. Levey, *The Messiah: An Aramaic Interpretation* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, 1974); see further Pinkhos Churgin, *Targum Jonathan to the Prophets*, repr. with Leivy Smolar and Moses Aberbach, *Studies in Targum Jonathan to the Prophets* (New York: Ktav, 1983); more recently, see Bruce D. Chilton, *The Aramaic Bible: The Isaiah Targum: Introduction, Translation, Apparatus and Notes* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1999). For the text in Aramaic and English, see S. R. Driver and Ad. Neubauer, eds. and trans., *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah according to the Jewish Interpreters* (repr., New York: Ktav, 1969), 1:4–5; 2:5–6 (hereafter cited as Driver-Neubauer).

5. Driver-Neubauer, 1:6; 2:7.

6. *Ibid.*, 1:7; 2:9.

exaltation, and 53:3, "a man of pains and known to sickness," to the Messiah.⁷

5. Yalkut Shimoni (a thirteenth compilation of earlier midrashic writings) applies 52:13 to the Messiah, stating that the Messiah, called the great mountain according to the Yalkut's interpretation of Zechariah 4:7, is "greater than the patriarchs . . . higher than Abraham . . . lifted up above Moses . . . and loftier than the ministering angels" (2:571; see also 2:621). Isaiah 53:5 is applied to the sufferings of "King Messiah" (2:620).⁸
6. Rambam (Maimonides) refers Isaiah 53:2 (along with the "Branch" prophecy in Zech. 6:12) to the Messiah in his Letter to Yemen (Iggeret Teman).⁹
7. Ramban (Nachmanides), while stating that the text in reality referred to Israel, followed the messianic interpretation of the text found in the Midrash, beginning with the Messiah's highly exalted state based on 52:13.¹⁰
8. Noteworthy also is the oft-quoted comment of Rabbi Moshe Alshech, writing in the sixteenth century, that "[o]ur rabbis with one voice accept and affirm the opinion that the prophet is speaking of the Messiah, and we shall ourselves also adhere to the same view."¹¹
9. The messianic interpretation of our passage is also found in the Zohar as well as in some later midrashic works, including Leqah

7. *Ibid.*, 1:9; 2:11.

8. This is the midrash to Psalm 2:6, dealing with the Hebrew word מִשָּׁחָה, interpreted here to mean, "I have woven him," with reference to Judges 16:14, "i.e., I have drawn him out of the chastisements. R. Huna, on the authority of R. Aha, says, '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."'" See Driver-Neubauer, 1:7–8; 2:9–10.

9. See Douglas Pyle, comp., *What the Rabbonim Say about Moshiach* (n.p.: Douglas H. Pyle, 2008), 57–58, citing Abraham S. Halkin, *Moses Maimonides' Epistle to Yemen*, ed. from MSS; Eng. trans. Boaz Cohen (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1952), 8. For a free online edition of Pyle's useful compilation, see www.moshiachontheweb.com.

10. See Driver-Neubauer, 1:75–82; 2:78–85.

11. *Ibid.*, 1:231–42; 2:258–74.

Tov, which applies 52:13 to the Messiah.¹² I will return to two salient passages in the Zohar at the end of this chapter.¹³

The messianic interpretations, however, have not become predominant in Jewish thinking, especially since the so-called “big three,” namely the commentators Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Radak (writing in the eleventh and twelfth centuries) all interpreted Isaiah 53 with reference to the nation of Israel as a whole, or, more particularly, the righteous within the nation.¹⁴ To a great extent, subsequent Jewish interpretation largely followed the interpretations of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Radak. It should also be noted—as it often is by counter-missionaries—that the corporate interpretation is attested as far back as Origen, who wrote in the early third-century work *Contra Celsum*:

Now I remember that, on one occasion, at a disputation held with certain Jews, who were reckoned wise men, I quoted these prophecies; to which my Jewish opponent replied, that these predictions bore reference to the whole 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. And in this way he explained the words, “Thy form shall be of no reputation among men;” and then, “They to whom no message was sent respecting him shall see;” and the expression, “A man under suffering.”¹⁵

12. *Ibid.*, 1:10–16; 2:12–16.

13. There are also some corporate interpretations to phrases in Isaiah 53 in the midrashim (see *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*), with primary reference to the righteous in Israel (my appreciation to Rabbi Yisroel C. Blumenthal for pointing this out to me). There is, however, no systematic interpretation of Isaiah 53—with either a corporate or individual subject—until the time of Rashi, since systematic commentaries on the biblical books began with him.

14. Driver-Neubauer, 1:37–39; 43–47; 48–54; 2:37–39; 43–48; 49–56, respectively.

15. *Contra Celsum*, 1.55. Origen’s reply was: “Many arguments were employed on that occasion during the discussion to prove that these predictions regarding one particular person were not rightly applied by them to the whole nation. And I asked to what character the expression would be appropriate, ‘This man bears our sins, and suffers pain on our behalf;’ and this, ‘But He was wounded for our sins, and bruised for our iniquities;’ and to whom the expression properly belonged, ‘By His stripes were we healed.’ For it is manifest that it is they who had been sinners, and had been healed by the Savior’s sufferings (whether belonging to the Jewish nation or converts from the Gentiles), who use such language in the writings of the prophet who foresaw these events, and who, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, applied these words to a person. But we seemed to press them hardest with the expression, ‘Because of the iniquities of My people was He led away unto death.’ For if the people, according to them, are the subject of the prophecy, how is the man said to be led away to death because of the iniquities of the people of God, unless he be a different person from that people

As far as the "big three" commentators are concerned, Rashi made no reference to Jesus (in keeping with his customary, nonpolemical style),¹⁶ Ibn Ezra began his comments with an anti-Jesus polemic, and Radak ended his comments with the same, although he noted this at the outset: "I will now proceed to expound the Parashah as it is expounded by my father of blessed memory [Joseph Kimchi] in the *Sepher HaGaluy* and the *Sepher HaBrit*, composed by him in answer to the heretics."¹⁷

Ibn Ezra wrote:

This Parashah is an extremely difficult one. Our opponents say that it refers to their God, supposing the 'servant' to signify his body: this, however, is not possible, for the body cannot 'understand' even during a man's lifetime. Moreover, if their view be correct, what will be the meaning of 'seeing seed?' for he (their God) saw no son; or of 'prolonging days,' which is equally untrue of him; or of 'dividing the spoil with the strong?' The proof of its proper meaning lies in the passages immediately before (lii. 12, where 'you' signifies Israel), and immediately afterwards (liv. 1, where 'the barren one' designates the congregation of Israel); similarly my servant means each individual belonging to Israel, and consequently, God's servant, who is in exile. But many have explained it of the Messiah, because our Rabbis have said [Midrash Ekha, i. 16] that in the day when the Sanctuary was laid waste, the Messiah was born, and that he was bound in fetters (Jer xl. 1). Several of these verses, however, have then no meaning, for instance, 'despised and forlorn of men,' 'taken from prison and judgment,' 'made his grave with the wicked,' 'will see seed and prolong days.' R. Sa'adyah interprets the whole Parashah of Jeremiah; and

of God? And who is this person save Jesus Christ, by whose stripes they who believe on Him are healed, when 'He had spoiled the principalities and powers (that were over us), and had made a show of them openly on His cross?'" The suggested dates for his interaction with these Jewish interlocutors are either 215–17 or 230–31; see Christoph Marschies, "Jesus Christ as a Man before God: Two Interpretive Models for Isaiah 53 in the Patristic Literature and Their Development," in Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, eds., *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, trans. Daniel P. Bailey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 225–323, esp. 284–92.

16. For the argument that Rashi's commentary to Isaiah should be seen against the backdrop of the Crusades, see Joel E. Rembaum, "The Development of a Jewish Exegetical Tradition Regarding Isaiah 53," *HTR* 75 (1982): 289–311. He states that "[t]he First Crusade symbolizes a confluence of two significant and interrelated trends in Western Europe: first, a heightened religious zeal affecting Jew and Christian alike; and, second, an expression of belligerent intolerance toward the non-believer that also manifested itself in adherents of the two faiths." This, according to Rembaum, is one of the reasons "why the collective-national treatment of Isaiah 53 acquired such currency in medieval European Jewry." *Ibid.*, 293.
17. Driver-Neubauer, 2:49; cf. 1:48.

this interpretation is attractive. . . . But in my judgment the Parashah is more intimately connected with the context, for what object can there be in mentioning Jeremiah when consolations addressed to Israel form the subject of the prophet's discourse both before and after? In fact, he is simply speaking of each one of God's servants who is in exile; or, which is more probable, 'my servant' may mean Israel as a whole, as in xli. 8.¹⁸

Radak closed his comments with a similar attack:

I should like to ask the Nazarenes who explain this Parashah of Jesus, how the prophet could have said, 'He shall be lifted up and lofty exceedingly?' If this alludes to the flesh, Jesus was not 'lifted up' except when he was suspended upon the cross; if it refers to the Godhead, then he was mighty and lifted up from the beginning. Moreover, the prophet says to them לָמוֹ, ver. 8, but then he ought to have said to him לוֹ, for לָמוֹ is plural, being equivalent to לָהֶם. Again he says, "He shall see seed;" if this refers to his flesh, then he had no seed; if to his Godhead, as the literal sense is inappropriate, they explain the word seed as alluding to his disciples, although his disciples are nowhere spoken of as either sons or seed. He says, too, 'He shall lengthen days;' but in the flesh he did not lengthen days, and if he says of his Godhead that as reward [for suffering] he will have long life, are not the days of God from everlasting to everlasting (cf. Ps. xc. 2)? Lastly, he says, "And he interceded for the transgressors;" but if he is God himself, to whom could he intercede?—Our Rabbis explain it of Moses, supposing that he 'poured out his soul to die' when he resigned himself to death (Ex. xxxii. 32), that he was 'numbered with the transgressors' because he was numbered with those who died in the wilderness, that he 'bore the sin of many' when he made atonement for the making of the golden calf, and that he 'interceded for the transgressors' when he sought mercy on the transgressions of Israel.¹⁹

To be sure, Ibn Ezra and Radak can be forgiven for failing to grasp the meaning of the incarnation—they are certainly not the first to struggle with comprehending Yeshua's complete and simultaneous deity and humanity!—and the "Christianity" to which they were exposed (for the most part, a medieval Roman Catholicism, replete with icons), could not have helped sensitize them to these highly nuanced, spiritual truths.²⁰ Moreover,

18. Driver-Neubauer, 2:43–44; cf. 1:43.

19. *Ibid.*, 2:55–56; cf. 1:54.

20. For recent reflections, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and*

there was no desire to “redeem” Yeshua as one of their own—the ultimate despised and rejected Jew, and thus a worthy subject of the text. It is also important to remember that the Jewish people in medieval exile were, by and large, religiously observant, hence the perception by these commentators that the servant was righteous and obedient, suffering because of the sins of the oppressive nations. All this must be factored into their reading of the text.

Let me now synopsise the “corporate Israel” (or, “righteous remnant of Israel”) interpretation according to Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Radak, going verse by verse through the text, following the rendering of the New Jewish Version.

52:13 “Indeed, My servant shall prosper, be exalted and raised to great heights.” Rashi refers this to “My servant Jacob,” viz., “the righteous among them,” pointing to “the last days” for the text’s fulfillment. According to Radak, “because the exaltation of Israel will be very great, the prophet uses a multiplicity of terms to express the idea: יְרוּם וְנִשָּׂא וְנִבְּחָה [ירום ונשא ונבחה].”²¹

52:14 “Just as the many were appalled at him—so marred was his appearance, unlike that of man, his form, beyond human semblance.” The nations were appalled at Israel’s abased state, even commenting to one another, “How marred is his [Israel’s] appearance from that of a man! See how their features are darker than those of other people, so, as we see with our eyes” (Rashi). Ibn Ezra observes, “How many nations are there in the world who think that the features of the Jew are disfigured and unlike those of other men, and ask whether a Jew has a mouth or an eye! This is done, for examples in the countries of Ishmael and Edom” (meaning, Islam and Christianity).

Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007); Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); for a very different perspective, see, e.g. Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God: The Struggle to Define Christianity during the Last Days of Rome* (New York: Harvest Books, 2000); for relevant Old Testament and early Jewish background, see Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); interestingly, Collins and Collins are more apt to see divine messianic imagery in the language of the Old Testament than in the New Testament.

21. When quoting Rashi, I have used the widely-accepted rendering of Rabbi A. J. Rosenberg, published in multiple volumes by Judaica Press. When quoting Radak, I followed Driver’s rendering in Driver-Neubauer, but always consulting the original; when quoting Ibn Ezra, I primarily followed Driver, but again, with constant attention to the original, as well as with reference to the annotated translation of M. Friedländer, *The Commentary of Ibn Ezra on Isaiah* (repr.; New York: Philip Feldheim, 1964). Note that the emphasis in the original from Rashi, Radak, and Ibn Ezra indicates Scripture citations.

52:15 "Just so he shall startle many nations. Kings shall be silenced because of him, for they shall see what has not been told them, shall behold what they never have heard." None of the major commentators understand the Hebrew הִזְעִיז to mean "sprinkle" (rendered "startle" in the NJV) in a positive priestly sense with any overtones of redemption.²² For Ibn Ezra, it is the blood of the nations that Israel will sprinkle when the time for vengeance comes, while Rashi takes it to mean "cast down," explaining, "So now, even he his hand will become powerful, and he will cast down the horns of the nations who scattered him," with apparent reference to Zechariah 1:21. Radak, however, associates the verb with speaking, suggesting that the nations will be constantly talking about Israel's exaltation, although ultimately, "kings shall be silenced because of him" because Israel's glory will appear in its greatness before them. Israel's exaltation, then, will mean vindication and even vengeance.

53:1 "Who can believe what we have heard? Upon whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" In contrast with standard Christian interpretation, which understands the people of Israel to be speaking here about the servant of the Lord—meaning Jesus the Messiah—traditional Jewish interpretation puts these words on the lips of the rulers of the nations who are then speaking about Israel, the servant of the Lord.²³ And note the verbal connection between 52:15 and 53:1, the former with שָׁמְעוּ , "they heard" (in the phrase, "which they had not heard") and the latter with לְשָׁמְעֵנוּ , "what we have heard." Radak explains "the Gentiles will say . . . [w]e never believed what we are now seeing with our own eyes."

53:2 "For he has grown, by His favor, like a tree crown, like a tree trunk out of arid ground. He had no form or beauty, that we should look at him: No charm, that we should find him pleasing." Radak is the most specific in his interpretation, stating that "the allusion is rather to Israel's coming up out of exile, which was as surprising and wondrous as for a sucker to spring up out of the dry ground, or for a tree to flourish there." Radak also finds a deeper meaning in the word לְפָנָיו [לְפָנָיו], lit., before him (rendered "by

22. Most recently, the "sprinkle" meaning has been defended by John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, Vol. 2, ICC (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 294–95, who render, "so he will spatter many nations," noting that the Greek versions of Aquila and Theodotion render with ῥαπατίσει , "sprinkle," while the Vulgate has *asperget* (again, "sprinkle") and the Peshitta *mdk'* ("purify"). The authors conclude that, "These renderings suggest that the versions were able to work out that this is a distinctive usage of the verb without the usual preposition."

23. For a rare Christian exception to this rule, see Alan A. MacRae, *The Gospel of Isaiah* (Chicago: Moody, 1977), who reads Isaiah 53 in strict Christological terms, but sees the nations, not Israel, as speaking at the beginning of Isaiah 53:1.

His favor" in the *njv*), explaining, "that Israel was continually before God, and so nearer to him than any other nation." Yet, while languishing in captivity, Israel's "countenance was deformed and disfigured, unlike other men's," loathed by the nations.

53:3 "He was despised, shunned by men, a man of suffering, familiar with disease. As one who hid his face from us, he was despised, we held him of no account." Rashi notes, "So is the custom of this prophet: he mentions all Israel as one man, e.g., (44:2), 'Fear not, My servant Jacob'; (44:1) 'And now, hearken, Jacob, My servant.' Here too (52:13), 'Behold My servant shall prosper,' he said concerning the house of Jacob." As to the nature of the sufferings described here, Ibn Ezra writes, "The *pains* and *sicknesses* spoken of are the sufferings of exile; and וידוע [וידוע]; here, "familiar with"] means that he was *taught* and accustomed to have the yoke of exile pass over him." And the nations could not even look at Israel because of the loathing they felt towards him.

53:4 "Yet it was our sickness that he was bearing, our suffering that he endured. We accounted him plagued, smitten and afflicted by God." We now begin to get into the theological crux of the passage, and for Ibn Ezra, it is simply a matter of Israel, the righteous servant, suffering because of the sins of the nations. He states that the substance of the verse is this: "It was we who caused his sickness; yet he carried it, and bore all the pains wherewith we pained him. . . . [I]t was God who smote him and afflicted him because the sicknesses ought to have come upon us, whose laws were altogether vanity, but they came upon Israel instead, whose law was a law of faithfulness."

The explanation of Radak goes further, beginning with a philosophical discussion, which is common in his writings: Based on Ezekiel 18:20, which states that the son cannot be punished for the sins of his father, or vice versa, how much more then is it true that "one man cannot suffer for another man, or one people for another people. What then is the meaning of *surely he has carried our sicknesses, and he was pierced for our transgressions, and by his wounds we are healed?*" He does not find Lamentations 5:7 to provide an answer to the question (there it is stated that the sons are suffering for the sins of their fathers), explaining the verse with reference to Exodus 20:5, viz., "when the children still continue to adhere to the works of their fathers." He also finds Lamentations 5:7 to be spoken by Jeremiah "in the style of mourners," thus uttered more out of emotion than reason.²⁴

How then are these expressions to be interpreted? The words are

24. For reflections on this larger philosophical issue, cf. Michael L. Brown, "Lamentations, Theology of," in *The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:884–93.

merely the *thoughts* of the Gentiles: “[I]t is not asserted that Israel actually bore the iniquity of the Gentiles, but the latter only imagine it to be the case when they see, at the time of [their] deliverance, that the faith which Israel adhered to was the true one, while that they themselves had adhered to was the false.” Thus, in the Gentiles’ attempt to explain the paradox—why did Israel suffer when Israel was so righteous whereas we enjoyed peace and tranquility while “adhering to falsehood”?—“it follows, therefore, that the sickness and pain which ought to have fallen upon us [the Gentiles] has fallen upon them [Israel], and they are our ransom [*koper* כֹּפֶר] and atonement [*kappara* כִּפּוּר]. While they were in exile,” we wrongly surmised that God had smitten them for their iniquity; we now realize “that it was not for their iniquity but for ours, as it is said, ‘He suffered pangs for our transgressions.’”

What a remarkable explanation! The text clearly speaks of vicarious, atoning suffering—indeed, there are some who believe that this was what Ibn Ezra had in mind when he spoke of the passage being “extremely difficult”—and Radak recognizes that fact. But, since he finds the concept to be contrary to biblical truth, he must write it off to the wrong thinking of the Gentile nations, which is quite a stretch, to put it mildly. Perhaps *all* the supposed reflections of the nations in this passage are just the product of their incorrect thinking—which is the precise opposite of the whole lesson that the chapter is allegedly teaching, viz., that the Gentiles finally understand why Israel suffered and how righteous and beloved Israel is.

Interestingly, Rashi has no problem interpreting the text in vicarious terms, explaining that the opening word אָכַן, which is normally translated as “surely,” actually means “but,” thus, “But he bore *our* sicknesses.” In other words, as Rashi explains, “But now we see that this came to him not because of his low state, but that he was chastised with pains so that all the nations be atoned for with Israel’s suffering. The illness that should rightfully have come upon us, he bore. . . . We thought that he was hated by the Omnipresent, but he was not so, but he was pained because of our transgressions and crushed because of our iniquities.”

53:5 “But he was wounded because of our sins, crushed because of our iniquities. He bore the chastisement that made us whole, and by his bruises we were healed.” According to Rashi, “he was chastised so that there be peace for the entire world.” For Ibn Ezra, being wounded “for our transgressions” means that Israel suffered because the nations sinned against them, and he understands “the chastisement that made us whole” to mean, “the chastisement of our peace” (שְׁלוֹמֵנוּ), explaining that “it is well known that all the time Israel is in the humiliation of exile the nations will have peace,” in contrast with the time of Israel’s deliverance being a

"time of distress" (with reference to Dan. 12:1). He finds support for this concept in Zechariah 1:11–12: the nations of the earth are at rest until God has mercy on Jerusalem. According to Radak, the wounds (or, more specifically, stripes) were the sufferings of exile; as to the nations being healed, Radak proffers the suggestion that the text "may allude to the misfortunes which would fall upon the Gentiles, but prevail only for a time: the Gentiles would then be *healed*, while Israel would be left in calamity." The "healing," then, experienced by the nations refers to something that happened in the past, and once Israel is exalted, the tables will be turned and the nations will get their due.

53:6 "We all went astray like sheep, each going his own way; and the Lord visited upon him the guilt of all of us." All three commentators explain that the nations are now recognizing and confessing the error of their ways, while Israel, Radak notes, "had been in possession of the truth." Ibn Ezra cites Jeremiah 16:19, where the nations finally realize that they inherited nothing but lies from their ancestors. Rashi interprets the last clause of Isaiah 53:6 in a forced manner—as noted by Ibn Ezra—taking the verb *הִפְּנִיָּע* in the sense of "intercede" rather than "visit," thus, "He accepted his prayers and was appeased concerning the iniquity of all of us, that He did not destroy His world."

53:7 "He was maltreated, yet he was submissive, he did not open his mouth; like a sheep being led to slaughter, like a ewe, dumb before those who shear her, he did not open his mouth." According to Radak, the reference to a ewe (*לְאֵיִלָּה*) points to Israel's "excessive weakness and prostration while in captivity, for with every animal the female is weaker than the male." As to the servant's silence, Ibn Ezra explains, "There is no need to interpret these words, for every Jew in exile exemplifies their truth: in the hour of his affliction he never opens his mouth to speak, even though he alone is just amongst them all: for he has no care in this world except for the service of God; he knows no prince or dignitary who will stand before him in the break when men rise up against him (Ps. 106:23; 124:2): he opens not his mouth at any time."

53:8 "By oppressive judgment he was taken away, who could describe his abode? For he was cut off from the land of the living through the sin of my people, who deserved the punishment." The three commentators agree that Israel will be led out of the imprisonment of exile, with the nations again confessing their recognition of the reason for Israel's abasement in light of its redemption. What is unique here, given the traditional Jewish understanding that it is the nations which are speaking in this chapter, is that each nation (or king) now speaks individually, a conclusion drawn from the words "through the sin of *my people*." According to Rashi, "The

tribulations that befell him, for from the beginning, he was cut off and exiled from the land of the living that is the land of Israel for because of the transgression of my people, this plague came to the righteous among them." Similarly, Radak writes, "Each nation will make this confession, saying that in consequence of their own transgression, and not Israel's, had the *stroke* fallen upon them."

What is key here is the final word לָמוֹ, normally meaning, "to them, for them," thus pointing to a plural servant if, in fact, לָמוֹ, refers to the people of Israel (or the righteous among them) as opposed to the nations. This, it should be recalled, was one of the polemical arguments raised by Radak against a singular servant.²⁵

53:9 "And his grave was set among the wicked, and with the rich, in his death—though he had done no injustice and had spoken no falsehood." Rashi states, "He subjected himself to be buried according to anything the wicked of the heathens would decree upon him, for they would penalize him with death and the burial of donkeys in the intestines of the dogs," while Radak claims that the Hebrew נָתַן, literally, "he gave," means "that he gave himself voluntarily to death," choosing fealty to the law rather than release at the price of unfaithfulness to God. Radak also understands the reference to being "with the rich" to mean that the Jewish people were killed because of their wealth rather than their wickedness.

Of particular importance in this verse is בְּמוֹתָיו, literally, "in his deaths," which would be an acceptable Semitic way of speaking of a particularly violent death for an individual. The plural, however is taken to be another hint that the servant is a corporate entity, thus for Rashi, the people were subjected to "all kinds of death," while, according to Radak, "The plural מוֹתָיו is employed because they used to be put to death in many ways: some were burnt, some were slain, and others were stoned—they gave themselves over to any form of death for the sake of the unity of the Godhead." Ibn Ezra, however, suggests that the word may carry a different meaning, namely, a burial mound (with reference to Deut. 33:29).²⁶

25. Interestingly, Ibn Ezra's closing comments here on לָמוֹ have been interpreted to mean either for the nations (cf. Driver-Neubauer, Stefan Schreiner, "Isaiah 53 in the *Sefer Hizzuk Emunah* ["Faith Strengthened"] of Rabbi Isaac ben Abraham of Troki," in Janowski and Stulmacher, *Suffering Servant*, 455 [the chapter runs from 418–61]; he takes Ibn Ezra to mean "upon the various nations") or to the Israelites (cf. Friedländer, *Commentary of Ibn Ezra on Isaiah*). While the overall meaning is the same in terms of who suffers for whom, the difference in the two interpretations of Ibn Ezra's words has to do with whether לָמוֹ points to a plural servant, a point that is not made explicitly by Ibn Ezra. Alternatively, the difference between interpretations can be traced to a reading of לָכֶם, "for/to you" (pl.), rather than לָמוֹ, in some MSS.

26. Literally, "the building erected over a grave"; see further W. Boyd Barrick, "The Rich

53:10 "But the Lord chose to crush him by disease, that, if he made himself an offering for guilt, he might see offspring and have long life, and that through him the Lord's purpose might prosper." Interestingly, Rashi speaks of God crushing his servant with sickness to "cause him to repent," explaining the guilt offering (כִּפּוּרִים) as follows: "Said the Holy One, blessed be He, 'I will see, if his soul will be given and delivered with My holiness to return it to Me as restitution for all that he betrayed Me, I will pay him his recompense, and he will see children, etc.'" Radak is more consistent with the otherwise righteous portrayal of the servant, but this leaves him with a paradox: since Israel in exile "adhered to the Law . . . and suffered martyrdom on behalf of it; since his pains cannot imply that he was caught in his own iniquities, we must suppose that it was the divine pleasure thus to *bruise and sicken him*: we do not understand all the mysteries of God's purposes." After the exile, however, Israel will be duly rewarded. Ibn Ezra explains that "[t]he prophet speaks here of the generation which will return to the law of God when the end, the advent of the Messiah, has taken place."

53:11 "Out of his anguish he shall see it; he shall enjoy it to the full through his devotion. 'My righteous servant makes the many righteous, it is their punishment that he bears.'" According to Rashi, "My servant would judge justly all those who came to litigate before him"; Ibn Ezra explains that Israel will teach the nations to fulfill the law, while Radak makes reference to the beatific vision of Isaiah 2:3, stating that Israel will make many nations righteous, "and by his righteousness will *bear the iniquities* of the Gentiles, for by it there will be peace and prosperity in the whole world, even for the Gentiles." Rashi once again brings a vicarious or, at the least, priestly interpretation to the last phrase: "He would bear, in the manner of all the righteous, as it is said (Num. 18:1): 'You and your sons shall bear the iniquity of the sanctuary.'"

53:12 "Assuredly, I will give him the many as his portion, he shall receive the multitude as his spoil. For he exposed himself to death and was numbered among the sinners, whereas he bore the guilt of the many and made intercession for sinners." Rashi once more sees redemptive power in Israel's sufferings: "**and with transgressors he was counted**: He suffered torments as if he had sinned and transgressed, and this is because of others; he bore the sin of the many; **and interceded for the transgressors**:"

Man from Arimathea (Matt. 27:57–60) and 1QIsa^a," *JBL* 96 (1977): 235–39; W. Boyd Barrick, *BMH as Body Language: A Lexical and Iconographical Study of the Word BMH When Not a Reference to Cultic Phenomena in Biblical and Post-Biblical Hebrew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 2008).

through his sufferings, for good came to the world through him." Ibn Ezra states that through the servant's pains, "the Gentiles had peace; and the sin which they ought to have carried was borne by him." He understands Israel's interceding for the transgressors in keeping with the injunction in Jeremiah 29:7 where the Jewish exiles are enjoined to seek the *shalom* of the city to which they have been carried away as captives. In a fascinating postscript, Ibn Ezra writes, "I have now explained for you the whole Parashah; in my opinion the expression *my servant* (52:13; 53:11) denotes the same person who is the subject of 42:1, 49:3; cf. 49:6; and the mystery is to be understood as I hinted in the middle of the book (ch. 40). Thus all these Parashas are connected intimately together." (For more on Ibn Ezra's cryptic remarks, see below.)

According to Radak, "the *mighty*" and "the *strong*" refer to "Gog and Magog, and the peoples who come with him to Jerusalem, as is described by Zechariah (12:14)." As for Israel carrying the sins of many, "he means to say that Israel bore the consequences of *the sin of many*, i.e., of the Gentiles when they sinned against him, and he bore the sufferings which their sin occasioned; cf. Ex. 5:16. Nevertheless, he continued *interceding* for the wicked who were *transgressing* against him, and sought blessings on their land from the Lord," also with reference to Jeremiah 29:7.

How should we respond to these interpretations? And what are some redemptive bridges that can be built from these nonmessianic readings of the text to a Yeshua-centered, messianic understanding?²⁷

Some of the linguistic objections are easily dismissed, such as the arguments that לָמוֹ in 53:8 and בְּמוֹתָיו in 53:9 point to a plural servant. The phrase נָנִיעַ לָמוֹ, as rightly understood by the NJV, most likely means that *the servant* receives a stroke *for them*—in other words, for those for whom he is suffering.²⁸ Note also that Isaiah elsewhere uses לָמוֹ to mean "to it" (not, "to them") in 44:15 ("he makes an idol and bows down *to it*"; NIV). So, even if

27. Most of the material in the following paragraphs, dealing with answering traditional Jewish objections to Isaiah 53, have been excerpted from Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus: Vol. 3: Messianic Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003). My appreciation to Baker Books for the use of this material.

28. 1QIsa^a reads [nwg' lmw] נָנִיעַ לָמוֹ, taken by Mitchell Dahood to be a passive form (a Qal passive, to be exact), hence, "smitten for them" (see his chapter, "Phoenician Elements in Isaiah 52:13–53:12," in Hans Goedicke, ed., *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1971], 69–70). This reading completely removes the very basis of this part of the "plural servant" objection. Note, however, that the passive meaning is not assured, according to Edward Yechezkel Kutscher, *The Language and Linguistic Background of the Dead Sea Isaiah Scroll* (Heb.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1959; Eng. trans. Elisha Qimron, Leiden: Brill, 1979). Kutscher explains the anomalous form as a phonetic variation commonly found in the Qumran manuscripts.

לָמוֹ was taken to refer to the servant (which, as stated, is unlikely), it could still mean “for him” as opposed to “for them.” As for בְּמוֹתָיו, the reason that the word “death” is in the plural is because it is an intensive plural, referring here to a violent death. Such usage of intensive plurals is extremely common in Hebrew, and there are other biblical examples for the plural “deaths” being used for an individual in Ezekiel 28:8 and 10 (28:8 reads, “and you [singular] will die the *deaths* [plural] of one slain [singular] in the depths of the sea”).²⁹

Regarding the individual vs. corporate identity of the servant, it should be noted again that there are numerous examples of the text being interpreted messianically in rabbinic literature—especially the exalted picture of 52:13—while elsewhere in rabbinic literature, as noted above, some verses are applied to Moses (b. Sotah 14a) while Saadia Gaon interpreted the text with reference to Jeremiah. It is also an open secret that Ibn Ezra, while following the corporate Israel reading of Isaiah 53 in his commentary, actually ended his comments here with the cryptic suggestion that the text (along with other, related passages in Isaiah 40–66) actually referred to the prophet rather than the people of Israel, a “second Isaiah” of sorts who wrote in the midst of the Babylonian exile.³⁰ Note also that the tenth-century Karaite commentator Yefet ben Eli, with nothing polemical to gain, understood the passage with reference to the Messiah.³¹

On a larger, contextual level, it should be noted that the servant of the Lord (Hebrew, עֶבֶד) is mentioned a total of seventeen times in Isaiah 40–51, sometimes with reference to the nation of Israel as a whole (41:8–9; 42:19 [2x]; 43:10; 44:21 [2x]; 45:4; 48:20), and sometimes with reference to a righteous individual within the nation (49:3, 5–7; 50:10). In several verses, it is not clear whether an individual or the nation (or righteous remnant within the nation) is referred to, although a good case can be

29. See Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus: Vol. 3*, 66–67. Note also that the LXX reads in the singular (ἀντὶ τοῦ θανάτου αὐτοῦ, “instead of his death”) and 1QIsa reads [bwm̄tw] בּוֹמוֹתָיו, either “in his death” (assuming a metathesis of the [w] ו and [m] מ) or “his burial mound” (cf. above, n. 26, for W. Boyd Barrick’s relevant philological and exegetical discussion), rendered as “his tomb” in Martin Abegg Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, trans., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: The Oldest Known Bible Translated for the First Time into English* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), 360. See further David A. Sapp, “The LXX, 1QIsa, and MT Versions of Isaiah 53 and the Christian Doctrine of Atonement,” in William H. Bellinger and William R. Farmer, eds., *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 170–92, specifically 178 and 190 (note that the Hebrew text in n. 10 on 178 is lacking the [waw] ו in [bwm̄tw] בּוֹמוֹתָיו, thus, wrongly, [bmtw] בּוֹמוֹתָיו).

30. Friedländer, *Commentary of Ibn Ezra on Isaiah*, 170–171, with n. 40; 246–47, with nn. 19–20.

31. Driver-Neubauer, 1:20–32; 2:19–31.

made for the individual interpretation (see 42:1; 44:1–2). Significantly, the references to the servant as a people actually end with 48:20 while the references to the servant as an individual come into indisputable focus beginning with chapter 49 and continuing through the end of chapter 53. Thus, by the time we reach Isaiah 52:13, the spotlight is on a person, not a people. The picture becomes quite clear!³²

As for the argument that it is the Gentile nations that are speaking throughout most of Isaiah 53, it is somewhat ludicrous to put one of the loftiest theological statements in the Bible into the mouths of pagan, idol-worshipping kings. This is not only illogical; it is without biblical precedent.³³

But there are more substantial arguments that invalidate this objection. First, there is a serious contextual flaw in putting these words on the lips of the Gentile leaders, which we can detect by looking carefully at the consistent language of the entire passage. The first person singular is only used by God: "my servant" (52:13), "my righteous servant" (53:11), "Therefore I will . . ." (53:12). Sound contextual exegesis would indicate that the same holds for true for "my people" in 53:8.³⁴ It is God himself speaking about his servant suffering for his people, Israel, rather than the kings speaking of their people individually.

This becomes even more clear when we realize that the onlookers in this passage (according to most traditional Jewish commentaries, the Gentile rulers) always express themselves in the first person plural: "our message" (53:1); "to attract us . . . that we should desire him" (53:2); "we esteemed him not" (53:3); "our infirmities . . . our sorrows . . . we considered him" (53:4); "our transgressions . . . our iniquities . . . brought us peace . . . we are healed" (53:5); "we all . . . each of us . . . the iniquity of us all" (53:6)—and then this language stops right here in verse 6. No more "we, us, our"—not once—indicating that, whatever group is speaking, be it the people of Israel as a whole or the alleged kings of the nations, they are no longer speaking after verse 6. This is why the rabbinic commentators must

32. See Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus: Vol. 3*, 41–42.

33. See *ibid.*, 63, where I point out that the Balaam oracles cannot be marshaled as a parallel to the Gentile kings allegedly being the speakers in Isaiah 53:1ff., "since: 1) Isaiah 53 is presented as thoughtful reflection whereas Balaam's prophecies are divinely inspired utterances delivered contrary to his own desires; and 2) the Balaam oracles do not present deep redemptive truths, such as the theology of vicarious suffering outlined in Isaiah 53, but rather messages concerning God's choosing of Israel out of the nations."

34. In Isaiah, "my people" always refers to Israel, either as God's people or as the prophet's people.

come up with the rather forced interpretation that, quite suddenly, each Gentile leader is now speaking individually, on behalf of his people.

The narrator must be either the prophet or (much more likely) God, speaking in the first person singular and describing the sufferings of the servant in the third person singular. And this means that the only legitimate, exegetically consistent interpretation of Isaiah 53:8 is that the servant of the Lord suffered for the people of Israel, not that the servant actually *was* the people of Israel.

Second, and more importantly, there is a fundamental theological flaw in the interpretation that the Gentile kings are the speakers in Isaiah 53. According to Jeremiah 30:11, God would completely destroy the nations among whom he scattered his people. While he promised to discipline his people—hence their scattering among these nations—he would eventually judge those nations for their sins against Israel. So, God's people would suffer for their own sins (in keeping with the Torah promises of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience), often at the hands of their enemies, but then the Lord would destroy those enemies. This is the opposite of what Isaiah 53 states: the servant was guiltless, suffering for the sins of his guilty people, who are then healed by his suffering.

How then can the Gentile leaders—leaders who are promised judgment, not blessing, for inflicting pain on the Jewish people—be pictured as the speakers in this chapter? If they were the speakers, they should have said, "We inflicted great suffering on the people of Israel, who were guilty of great sin against God, but we went too far in our punishments and now Israel's God will utterly destroy us." There is quite a difference!³⁵

And this brings us to the central point of this chapter, viz., that the vicarious interpretation of the text when applied to Israel (or, the righteous remnant within Israel) does not work, since Israel's sufferings in exile did *not* bring healing to the nations, while, conversely, it is impossible to read the text fairly while eliminating the concept of effectual, vicarious suffering. Isaiah 53 indisputably features the vicarious sufferings of the righteous servant as a central theme, and that righteous servant cannot be

35. See Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus*, Vol. 3, 62–65. It is commonly argued in traditional Jewish and counter-missionary circles that the word [*shemu'atenu*] שְׂמֵנוּ, "our report, what we have heard" in Isaiah 53:1 links to 52:15, [*sham'u*] שָׁמְעוּ, "they heard," as if the Gentile kings who *heard* about the servant of the Lord (meaning Israel) now share *what they have heard* with the world. But this is hardly compelling. It could just as easily be argued that the *report* of 53:1 is what they *heard* about the servant of the Lord in 52:12, rather than what they shared. Contextually, both in the immediate context and the larger biblical context, it is the latter interpretation (vicarious suffering) that makes much more sense.

Israel, whose sufferings have not brought atonement and forgiveness to the nations.

In our synopsis, we noted how Ibn Ezra and Radak struggled with the verses that pointed most clearly to the servant's vicarious sufferings, with Radak even claiming that the Gentiles wrongly supposed that Israel's sufferings brought them healing, surely an example of one of Radak's weakest biblical expositions. Other Jewish interpreters also wrestled unsuccessfully with the nonvicarious view, including Don Isaac Abravanel, who explained the same clause to mean "that when the 'stripes of a wound,' which are the 'clearing of an evil' (Prov. 20:30), were inflicted on him, there would be healing and peace for our souls: on this account, therefore, we were desirous for his destruction."³⁶ As for being "wounded for our transgressions," etc., Abravanel wrote, "Israel also received other indignities, being wounded and bruised for our wickedness and iniquities: for in the malignity of our purpose, and the multitude of our transgressions, we were ever wreaking destruction in their midst."³⁷ The thirteenth-century Italian rabbi Y'sha'yah ben Mali also tried to explain away the clearly vicarious dimensions of the text, writing, "as we [i.e., the nations] inflicted upon him [namely, the servant, Israel] injuries and blows, it seemed to us as though we had ourselves been healed, so greatly did we rejoice at his calamity."³⁸ What nonredemptive readings of a gloriously redemptive text!

In my judgment, having looked at this text now for close to four decades, I cannot see any legitimate reading of Isaiah 53 that denies the effectual, vicarious nature of the servant's sufferings.³⁹ In this regard, the observation of Joel Rembaum is telling: "Interestingly, in adapting the so-called Suffering Servant passage for their own purposes, Jewish

36. Driver-Neubauer, 1:163; 2:178.

37. *Ibid.*, 1:162; 2:177.

38. *Ibid.*, 2:76; cf. 1:73.

39. Cf. Fredrick Häggglund, *Isaiah 53 in the Light of Homecoming after Exile*, FAT 2.31 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), who understands the servant of the Lord here to be the exiles who had suffered vicariously on behalf of the the "stay-at-homes" who were not exiled. Thus even this historical-critical reading of the text does not deny the presence of vicarious atonement in Isaiah 53. With regard to R. N. Whybray's reading of the text in nonvicarious terms in *Thanksgiving for a Liberated Prophet*, JSOTSup 4 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1978), 29–76, I previously commented that "I can only note that R. N. Whybray's attempt to read Isa 53 without any reference at all to vicarious suffering seems to obviate the cumulative force of the verses and phrases which he dissects. . . . I find inescapable the simple conclusion that "when he [i.e., the subject of Isa 52:13–53:12] was smitten, we were healed," citing J. A. Alexander, *The Prophecies of Isaiah* (repr.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 1/2:296; see Michael L. Brown, *Israel's Divine Healer*, Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 393n121.

interpreters, of both the medieval and the modern periods, incorporated certain Christian concepts into their exegesis.⁴⁰ Indeed, it can be argued that these "Christian concepts" became part of rabbinic exegesis precisely because they were rooted in the biblical text.

I concur with Hermann Spieckermann who wrote that

[f]ive criteria seem central to the idea of vicarious suffering in Isaiah 53:

- a. *One person intercedes for the sins of others. . . .*
- b. *The one who intercedes for the sins of others is himself sinless and righteous. . . .*
- c. *The vicarious act of the one occurs once for all. . . .*
- d. *One intercedes for the sins of others of his own will. . . .*
- e. *God brings about the vicarious action of the one for the sins of the others intentionally.*⁴¹

Or, as expressed by Bernd Janowski: "The bottomless depth of this text is reflected in the vicarious event: an innocent one bears the guilt of others, perishes by it, and will nevertheless have 'success'."⁴²

It is, therefore, not surprising that both Rashi and a number of other Jewish interpreters recognized Isaiah 53 to be speaking of vicarious sufferings—indeed, even vicarious atonement—despite the fact that it was difficult to explain how this applied to the effects of Israel's suffering in exile. We previously noted Rashi's comments that the servant "was chastised with pains so that all the nations be atoned for with Israel's suffering. . . . he was chastised so that there be peace for the entire world." Similarly, the eleventh-century rabbi Yoseph Kara wrote that "the Holy One created for Himself one just nation in the world, which carried on itself all iniquities in order that the whole world might be preserved; *and by his stripes* there was healing for us." In keeping with this, the thirteenth-century, anti-Christian apologist rabbi Yoseph ben Nathan explained, "*But he carried our sickness: now we [meaning, the Gentile kings] see that that was not the cause: the sickness which ought to have come upon us, came upon him, and through them atonement was made for us: his chastenings were for our transgressions, and they resulted in our peace; the Holy One did not, as he would otherwise have done, destroy the world for our iniquities.*"⁴³

40. Rembaum, "Development of a Jewish Exegetical Tradition," 289.

41. Hermann Spieckermann, "The Conception and Prehistory of the Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament," in Janowski and Stulmacher, *Suffering Servant*, 5–7 (the chapter runs from 1–15).

42. Bernd Janowski, "He Bore Our Sins: Isaiah 53 and the Drama of Taking Another's Place," in Janowski and Stulmacher, *Suffering Servant*, 71 (the chapter runs from 48–74).

43. Driver-Neubauer, 2:72–73; cf. 1:69–70.

Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi in the Kuzari also understood the text vicariously, with reference again to Israel's sufferings in exile: "Now we are burdened by them [viz., the infirmities and diseases of Isa. 53:4], whilst the whole enjoys rest and prosperity. The trials which meet us are meant to prove our faith, to cleanse us completely, and to remove all taint from us. If we are good the Divine Influence is with us in this world" [2:44, Hirschfeld trans.].⁴⁴

And then, the heart of the matter from the Kuzari, as reproduced almost verbatim by Isaac Troki, the Karaite polemicist and author in his work *Hizzuk Emunah*, "Faith Strengthened":

The reason for this is that Israel is the choicest of human kind, just as the heart is the choicest organ in the body; when, therefore, they are in exile in the midst of the nations, like the heart in the midst of the other organs, they bear all the calamities which fall upon the Gentiles in whose midst they are exactly as the heart bears the bitterness and anguish of all the body in the centre of which it resides. (Neubauer and Driver, 2:246).

This is very similar to the teaching found in the Zohar:

The children of the world are members of one another. When the Holy One desires to give healing to the world, he smites one just man amongst them, and for his sake heals all the rest. Whence do we learn this? From the saying, "He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities," *ובחבורתו נרפא לנו* [Isa. 53:5], i.e., by the letting of his blood—as when a man bleeds his arm—there was healing for us—for all the members of the body. In general a just person is only smitten in order to procure healing and atonement for a whole generation.⁴⁵

As stated in the seventeenth-century midrash Assereth Memrot:

The Messiah, in order to atone for them both [for Adam and David], will *make his soul a trespass-offering*, as it is written next to this, in the Parashah [scriptural passage] *Behold my servant* [i.e., Isa. 52:13–53:12]: *אָשָׁם* [guilt offering], i.e. cabalistically [i.e., using Rabbinic Bible numerics], Menahem

44. Cited in Schreiner, "Isaiah 53 in the *Sefer Hizzuk Emunah*," in Janowski and Stulmacher, *Suffering Servant*, 446.

45. Cited in Driver-Neubauer, 2:15; the Zohar states that this explains a verse in Ecclesiastes (7:15), "In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these: a righteous man perishing in his righteousness, and a wicked man living long in his wickedness." Cf. also b. Shab. 33b, "The righteous are taken by the iniquity of the generation."

son of Ammiel [a title for the Messiah in the Talmud].⁴⁶

And all this ties in with the well-known rabbinic teaching that the death of the righteous atones for the sins of the generation. As expressed by Orthodox rabbi and historian Berel Wein:

Another consideration tinged the Jewish response to the slaughter of its people. It was an old Jewish tradition dating back to Biblical times that the death of the righteous and innocent served as an expiation for the sins of the nation or the world. The stories of Isaac and of Nadav and Avihu, the prophetic description of Israel as the long-suffering servant of the Lord, the sacrificial service in the Temple—all served to reinforce this basic concept of the death of the righteous as an atonement for the sins of other men.

Jews nurtured this classic idea of death as an atonement, and this attitude towards their own tragedies was their constant companion throughout their turbulent exile. Therefore, the wholly bleak picture of unreasoning slaughter was somewhat relieved by the fact that the innocent did not die in vain and that the betterment of Israel and humankind somehow was advanced by their "stretching their neck to be slaughtered." What is amazing is that this abstract, sophisticated, theological thought should have become so ingrained in the psyche of the people that even the least educated and most simplistic of Jews understood the lesson and acted upon it, giving up precious life in a soaring act of belief and affirmation of the better tomorrow. This spirit of the Jews is truly reflected in the historical chronicle of the time:

"Would the Holy One, Blessed is He, dispense judgment without justice? But we may say that he whom God loves will be chastised. For since the day the Holy Temple was destroyed, the righteous are seized by death for the iniquities of the generation" (*Yeven Metzulah*, end of Chapter 15).⁴⁷

Isn't that the theology of the gospel? Isn't that the meaning of the cross? And isn't that a redemptive bridge that connects traditional Jewish

46. Driver-Nebauer, 1:394–95 (the numeric value for guilt offering is 341, which equals the numeric value of Menahem ben Ammiel); the emphasis in the original indicates Scripture citations. The midrash concludes with another citation from Isaiah 53: "And what is written after it? *He shall bis seed, shall have long days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.*"

47. Berel Wein, *The Triumph of Survival: The Story of the Jews in the Modern Era 1650–1990* (Brooklyn, NY: Shaar, 1990), 14.

thinking to Yeshua our Messiah? It is he who is the definitive expression of "Israel" and the ultimate definition of what it means to be a Jew—chosen and yet rejected; called and yet misunderstood; living and yet dying and then living again. He is the one who fulfills our people's destiny and mission in the world. He is the ideal righteous sufferer whose perfect life and atoning death bring healing—meaning forgiveness and reconciliation and restoration—to Israel and the world.

I close with these final thoughts. We have seen in this chapter that, according to many traditional Jewish interpreters, the Gentile nations misinterpreted the (apparently) vicarious sufferings of the (relatively speaking) righteous Jews in exile. This is a step in the right direction, but it is not quite on target. What has really happened is that the *people of Israel* misinterpreted the *truly vicarious* sufferings of the *totally righteous* Jew. Now we have hit the bull's eye!

In the years following the Holocaust, the godly and courageous German Christian leader Basilea (née Dr. Klara) Schlink pointed out how much the Jewish people were like Jesus:

We as Christians are to hold in high esteem this people who bears such a close resemblance to Jesus. The sight of Jews as an oppressed and afflicted people crossing the face of the earth, despised and rejected, should make us think of those words of Jesus about the destitute and the needy: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40). Who matches so accurately our Lord's description "the least of these my brethren" as His people Israel. Who has suffered so much contempt from all nations down through the ages? Who has been so rejected? From whom did men turn away their faces? Who has been persecuted and tormented with such burning hatred? Who has been wounded and tortured to death so often as this His people? Here, indeed, are the brethren of our Lord Jesus.

It may well be that He often feels closer to His people Israel than to those proud Christians who believe in Him and yet refuse to acknowledge their guilt towards the Jews, their heartlessness in passing their brother in desperate need.⁴⁸

It behooves us to show our Jewish people how much Jesus is like them, the circle within the circle of Isaiah 53.

The Zohar states that:

48. M. Basilea Schlink, *Israel, My Chosen People: A German Confession before God and the Jews* (Eng. trans., Old Tappan, NJ: Chosen, 1987), 33–34.

[t]he Messiah enters [the Hall of the Sons of Illness] and summons all the diseases and all the pains and all the sufferings of Israel that they should come upon him, and all of them come upon him. And would he not thus bring ease to Israel and take their sufferings upon himself, no man could endure the sufferings Israel has to undergo because they neglected the Torah.⁴⁹

Had not the Messiah taken our place, suffering on our behalf, we would have perished long ago.⁵⁰

And so, the greatest answer to the traditional Jewish objections to Isaiah is the power of the text itself. That is why many Jewish seekers who have studied the passage carefully and prayerfully have discovered that Franz Delitzsch was right: Isaiah 53 "is the most central, the deepest, and the loftiest thing that the Old Testament prophecy, outstripping itself, has ever achieved."

49. See Raphael Patai, *The Messiah Texts* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979), 116.

50. For a more expansive treatment of the rabbinic concept that "the death of the righteous atones," with specific messianic application, see Michael L. Brown, *Answering Jewish Objections to Jesus: Vol. 2: Theological Objections* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), sec. 3.15.