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# The Suffering Messiah and Isaiah 53 in the Light of Rabbinic Literature

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THE WELL-KNOWN ISRAELI author Shalom Ben Chorin, defining the focus of Jewish Christian dialog in his *Im Jüdisch-christlichen Gespräch*, states that this discussion concentrates on four main items: on the Messianic claim of Jesus, on his place as the Son of God, on reconciliation, and on Jesus as the end of the law. It is likewise true that Christian missionary outreach proceeds on the same four wheels; the culmination of the gospel occurs in the message of the cross. This point is exceedingly relevant when we meet the Jewish nation, because the suffering people need a suffering Messiah.

The Apostle Paul determined "not to know anything save Jesus Christ and him crucified." This, however, was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks; the Jews understood the meaning of the suffering Messiah, but they were offended. The situation has not varied since those times.

When the famous Jewish professor Joseph Klausner describes "the Messianic idea in Israel," he states that the suffering Messiah "has no foundation whatsoever in the Bible." And he goes on to say "we find many prophecies from the time of the prophets which relate undoubtedly to the salvation to come, but in all this they do not contain the smallest hint of a personal Messiah." Some scholars state that one cannot even find the word "Messiah" in the Old Testament. Yet it occurs twice in Daniel in ninth chapter and once in the second Psalm. The reason why professor Klausner had so a negative attitude toward our theme is his apologetic tendency as well as the fact that he was an ardent supporter of Ginsburg's prophetic socialism.

There are, in fact, some very clear prophecies about a suffering servant in the Old Testament which have been understood by the Jews as relating to Messiah; for example, Psalm 22; Zechariah 3:8-10; Daniel 9:24-26; Zechariah 12:9-11; 13:5-7; and, of course, Isaiah 53. Even Genesis 3:15 has been understood as referring to the suffering Messiah in, for example, the Aramaic Targums, which reflect Jewish thinking from the time of Jesus down to the fifth century. The famous pupil of Rabbi Hillel, Jochanan Ben Uzziel, explained that the seed of woman was the King Messiah and that he "will be wounded in his heels." Targum Jerusalem states similarly: "In the end of the days, in the day of the King Messiah, he will be pierced in his heels."

Isaiah 53 has been a stumbling block down through the centuries for the Jewish scholars. Eben Ezra, a Spanish Bible commentator in the twelfth century says: "This is an extremely difficult passage. Our opponents claim that this refers to their God." The modern Jewish lectionary system has completely omitted Isaiah 52:13-53:12 from

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the *haftaroth*-readings. But this ploy does not remove the problem itself. In treating of the identity of the suffering servant, the Jewish commentators hover between Jeremiah, Hezekiah, Isaiah himself, and Israel personified as a corporate group. Already Jochanan Ben Uzziel paraphrased Isaiah 53:13 as follows: "Behold, my servant Messiah shall deal prudently; he shall be exalted." But when he expounds the following chapter, he relates it to the sufferings of his people. Midrash Tanchuma, however, explains the same verse in the ninth century: "This is the King Messiah, who will be exalted and extolled higher than Abraham, higher than Moses, and higher than the serving angels" (cf. Hebrews 1:1-14).

The Jewish attempt to relate the picture of the suffering servant to their own nation was known also to Origen, for in his *Contra Celsum* he tells of a Jew who said "that these things were prophesied of the whole people as a whole; it was both dispersed abroad and smitten that there might be many proselytes." And, in fact, there is a passage in the Talmud in which a rabbi states that God has driven his people into dispersion only in order to make many proselytes through them. We can understand how a strong notion of the sufferings of Israel arose in the Middle Ages from the persecutions caused by the Crusaders. The same feeling is behind the elementary school-books in Israel, which claim that Isaiah 53 "refers to the sufferings of the Jews which they must endure for other nations in order to redeem them from their sins."

In the fourteenth century we can observe a slight change. Rabbi Moshe Cohen Ibn Crispin began to oppose the common attitude among the rabbis. They did not take seriously the main meaning of the chapter: "Having forsaken the wisdom of our teachers, they are inclined to the stubbornness of their own opinions." This misinterpretation, however, "twists the passage from its main meaning," since it "was given by God to describe the Messiah."

A new phase of interpretation began then in the Holy Land itself. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there were about thirty-five to fifty Jewish villages in Israel. The northern city of Safed was especially famous for its Jewish emigrants and the first printing house in Asia. Two leading rabbis who were living in Safed hinted at the old interpretation of Isaiah 53. Rabbi Elijah de Vidas (sixteenth century) said, "The meaning of 'he was wounded for our transgressions' is that whoever will not admit that the Messiah suffers for our iniquities must endure and suffer for them himself." A second rabbi in Safed, Moshe El Sheikh, pointed to the same tradition in his *Commentaries On the Earlier Prophets*: "Our rabbis accept and confirm with one voice the opinion that the prophet is speaking here of the King Messiah, and we shall also ourselves adhere to the same view."

One of the most apt summations of the rabbinic opinions is given by Rabbi Isaac Abrabanel (died 1508). He was a bitter opponent of Christianity, treating the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah as follows: "The learned among the Nazarenes expound this in relation to a man who was crucified in Jerusalem at the end of the period of the second Temple and who, according to them, was the Son of God and took flesh in the virgin's womb in accord with their writings. Jonathan

Ben Uzziel interprets it in the Targum to mean the future Messiah; and this is also the opinion of our learned men in the majority of their midrashim."

Some old pasages in the Jewish literature, moreover, portray the suffering nature of the Messiah. When I was working in Jerusalem, I became acquainted with a former Jewish rabbi, who sold his Talmud and Hebrew commentaries to me before he died. In Talmud Sanhedrin 98 there is a long discussion of the nature of the Messiah: "The Son of David does not come except in a generation which is totally righteous or totally guilty." This total depravity relates to the reconciliation to come. After these words the Messiah is presented as a "second Moses"; as a *Jinnon*, whose origin is before the stars and Zodiac (Ps. 72:17); as a *Chaninah*, which means "a gracious one"; as a *Mena-chem*, comforter; and as a *Metsorah* or *Naguua*. These names mean a "leper" and one who "is stricken with sickness." The word *Naguua* is taken from Isaiah 53:4 and relates to the Messiah, who is "stricken" with our diseases. Rabbi Joshua Ben Levi queries where the Messiah is and how he could know him. "He is before the gates of Rome. He sits among the poor and sick binding and healing them."

In the Book of Zohar, which dates in its original form from the second century (having been composed by Rabbi Simon Ben Jochai, although its final form is a product of the thirteenth century), there is an interesting statement: "When the Messiah receives a message about the misery of Israel in their dispersion and sees that they are themselves responsible for their agony, he weeps loudly for their sins, for it is written: he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities."

Isaiah 53 speaks of a vicariously suffering Messiah. In the tractate Pesikta Avkat Rochel from the eighth century we can observe the atoning nature of the Jewish Messianic expectation: "When God created his world he extended his hand from the throne of his glory and brought forth the soul of the Messiah. Then he said to him: Wilt thou heal my sons and redeem them after six thousand years? He answered: I will. God said to him: Wilt thou then suffer punishment in order to blot out their sins as it is written, 'But he bore our diseases'? He said to Him: I will suffer it with joy."

Although the picture of the suffering Messiah is omitted from the regular lectionary systems of the synagogue, the main message is still to be found in the prayers of the Day of Atonement, such as *Machzor rabbah*. This well-known hymn was composed by Eleazar Ben Qualir in the ninth century and reads as follows in the Sephardic Hebrew edition: "Messiah our righteousness has turned from us; we are dispersed and there is none to justify us. Our iniquities and the yoke of our transgressions is a burden. But he is wounded for our transgressions, he will carry our sins upon his shoulders that we may find forgiveness for our iniquities, and by his stripes we are healed; the time is come to make a new creation forever; bring him up from the circles of the nations, draw him forth from Seir that we may hear him from **Lebanon** a second time by **Jinnon**. **He is our God, he is our father, he is our King, he is our Savior, and he will deliver us a second**



time and he will proclaim his grace a second time in the sight of all saying: I will save you in the end as in the beginning . . .”

This prayer has many features which relate to our Christian faith and to the Old Testament prophecies: the Messiah is “our righteousness” (Jer. 23:6, 33:16); the Jewish nation is dispersed after having denied the suffering Messiah. We have already met the weeping Messiah in the Jewish literature. In Chagigah 5b this idea is related to Jeremiah 13:17, where “my soul shall weep for your pride”: “Because of the pride of Israel the Torah will be taken from them and given to the heathen.” In connection with Psalm 118:21-26 and its cornerstone Mezudat David states: “This stone will be refused, but it will be put later in the most honoured place so that everybody can see it.” Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Ben Isaac (died 1105), the main voice of Jewish Biblical commentary, expounds this prophecy in relation “to the Messiah born in Bethlehem, and his origin is from days of old according to Psalm 72:17, for ‘before the sun his name was Jinnon’,” (the Branch, one of the seven words for a rod or root). Biur Ha-Injan explains in regard to Isaiah 28:16 that this ‘precious cornerstone’ will be “later a cornerstone which proves to be the seed of David and the foundation of foundations”—“it does not happen straight away; there are first great sufferings.” No wonder that our prayer for the Day of Atonement speaks three times about a salvation which occurs “a second time.” Then the Christ will “make a new creation” (Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:15). But the Messiah must be brought “from the circles of the nations” and from Seir, which is a hidden name for Rome. The word *Lebanon* is a well-known name for the temple because, according to its root, *laban*, “white,” it “bleaches the sins of Israel” (Joma 39b). There are three quotations in the Talmud stating that “forty years before the devastation of the temple the offerings lost their effect and the doors of the sanctuary opened by themselves”; in one of them there is a statement made by a famous rabbi, Jochanan Ben Zakkai, who was a close friend of Nicodemus. He also noted that the most important “western lamp was extinguished” and then Rabbi Isaac Ben Tablai explains the meaning of the word *Lebanon*. For us Christians the broken veil which was rent in twain confirms the reality of the atonement. Verily the Christ “made an end of sins, reconciliation for iniquity” and he brought in “everlasting righteousness” (Dan. 9:24).

There is in the Jewish Prayerbook another prayer, moreover, which has a real Christian message, relating to the suffering Messiah in Isaiah 63:9. This verse combines the sufferings of private people and the sufferings of the Messiah, stating that God is sharing our griefs. “In all their affliction he was afflicted and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.” Who is this “angel of his presence”? According to the Jewish literature he is “the angel of the covenant,” the Messiah himself. The Hebrew expression refers to the “angel of the countenance,” *mal'ach ha-panim*. It relates to *Peniel* in Genesis 32, the messenger of “the face of God.” He will redeem his people in their affliction.

The Jewish Prayerbook presents an interesting supplication after

the blowing of the *shofar* horn at the Jewish New Year: "May it be Thy will that the sound of this horn be heard in the mansion of God by our representative *Tartiel*, which name has been given by Eliah, be his name blessed, and by Jesus the Prince of Countenance (*Jeshuua Sar ha-Panim*) and by *Metatron*, and may grace fall upon us. Blessed be Thou, Lord of Grace." In some prayerbooks the name *Jesus* is enclosed by parentheses. I know of two cases in which some young men were asking who this Jesus, the Prince of Countenance, might be—they were driven very quickly from the synagogue. According to Gottlieb Klein, the famous chief rabbi of Stockholm, "*Metatron* is the nearest serving spirit to God, he is his trustee and representative, and, on the other hand, as serving spirit to God, he is the representative of Israel before God . . . *Metatron* has also the name Prince of Countenance, *Sar ha-Panim*, or the Prince; he is sitting in the innermost room (*penim*)." In the Book of Zohar there are also many citations concerning the *Metatron*: "Every prayer to God must be first addressed to *Metatron*." "Whosoever speaks to me, said God, he may do it through the medium of *Metatron*." "The second figure (*sefirah*) is called *Metatron*, the Keeper, which is an inferior equivalent for the Son of God." "*Metatron*, the Keeper of Israel, is the same person of whom we read in the second Psalm: Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee." "He is the image of the Holiest" and "he is not created, moulded, or made."

The word *Metatron* is composed of two Greek words *meta* and *thronon*, "with the throne." The word *Tartiel* is Aramaic and means "the second God." Jesus is the Prince of Countenance who has been afflicted in our afflictions and redeemed us. This mysterious prayer speaks about the sonship of Jesus and his Messianic nature as a "representative of Israel before God."

The fifty-third chapter of Isaiah plays an important role in the New Testament. In fact there are fifteen different references to this chapter in the New Testament. The Messiah will be despised and neglected, forsaken by men and by God himself. The phrase "rejected by men," *chadal ishim*, is literally translated: "he has *ceased* to be a man"—he did not have any human "form or comeliness." A Hebrew dictionary explains that this would mean that one does not have a name anymore, he is beyond all recognition as human. The Hebrew word for "despised," *mushchat* means spoiled, ruined, dilapidated, and crippled—Jesus was crippled for us. There is an interesting quotation from the ninth century in *Pesiqta Rabbati*. It tells how "once all the patriarchs come to the Messiah in the month of Nisan (Passover time) and they say: . . . thou art greater than we, because thou hast carried the sins of our children . . . thou hast become a reproach of men (Ps. 22:6) and thou has descended to the darkness; thou hast done all this for the sins of our children."

After seeing all these quotations from the Bible and the rabbinic literature we must believe that there are more than "small hints" of the suffering Messiah in Jewish messianic expectation. But Christ will be a surprise for everybody. "Many were astonished at thee; . . . so shall he sprinkle many nations" (Is. 52:14-15). The Hebrew word for "sprinkle" has sometimes been translated with "startle" or "surprise."

The rabbis however interpret this word as relating to the "sprinkling of water." According to Ezekiel 36:25 God will "sprinkle clean water" upon his people and he will give "a new spirit" to them. This could be a reference to baptism, as a rabbi once said in Israel. It may also relate to the sprinkling of blood (Heb. 12:24, 1 Peter 1:2). According to the regulations in the Talmud, the high priest made the sign of cross when he sprinkled the blood on the altar. The rule for the sprinkling of blood said: "loo lemaalah veloo lematah ellah ke-matsleev"—"not up and not down but as if making a cross." So the blood was spread evenly.

But to whom "is the arm of the Lord revealed?" (Is. 53:1). And what does this "arm" really mean? In Deuteronomy 33:27 there is a deep promise: "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." Targum Onkelos paraphrases this saying: "These *arms* are the Memra (the Word, Logos) by whom the world has been created." The word *Memra* appears 599 times in the Aramaic paraphrases but not a single time in the Talmud, because this concept was identified with the word *Messiah* and used by the first Christians. Targum Jonathan, for example, explains that the serpent in the wilderness relates to the Messiah: "He who raises his heart in the name of Yahweh's Memra will remain in life." Christ is the outstretched hand of God for us. God reveals himself by his "arm," by the Messiah.

Yet Jesus came to our darkness. He is ready to sit among the stricken ones. He is the true *Metsorah*, the Leper, who does not despise our leprosy. When the famous Francis of Assisi became aware of the love of Christ, he dismounted his horse on the wayside and began to embrace a leper. Afterward he founded many homes for leprosy people, not only for men but also for women. Jesus took upon himself the form of a servant; he is the suffering servant of God. And the suffering people need a suffering Messiah.

I remember how last year I entered the Garden of Gordon's Golgotha. There was an orthodox Jew wearing a broad black hat almost on the threshold of the inner gate. He had big reddish eyes as if he had been crying. After having shown the Rock of Golgotha to the tourists, I came back and saw the man in the same place. So I stood beside him and recited the beginning of Isaiah 53 by heart in Hebrew: "Mi he'emiin lishmuatenu uzrooa Adonai al mi miglatah . . . Who hath believed our report and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? . . . yes, he was wounded for our transgressions." There I ended. Then we had a short service before the empty tomb. When I came back, the man was still there. I put my hand on his shoulder and I blessed him in Hebrew. Then he raised his reddish eyes, full of sorrow and grief. These eyes expressed the Messianic expectations of the Jews down through the centuries. The man said only one thing: "Thanks to you!" Jesus was afflicted in all our afflictions, and the suffering people need a suffering Messiah.