

Introduction to Part 1 of Isaiah 53

King Solomon admonishes us: “*And more than this, my son, take care: for the making of many books has no end...*”¹ Here he warns us against making many books, so there is a need for me to answer: Why have I violated his advice?

The reason is that I feel that this present work adds something that is missing in what has been published previously. Considering the importance of this chapter, and the many works written to try and explain it, I felt that it was worthwhile that I present my new perspective on it.

This new perspective combines two approaches to this passage: First: that of a commentator, who looks at this passage in a context, and seeks to understand what the Prophet and God meant. Second: pedagogy. The material is presented in a way to make it easier for the reader to grasp what is really being talked about. In this introduction I will give an example of this approach and in addition I will point out what the order and content of this part of my work on Isaiah 53 is about.

Let me illustrate what I mean. There are always issues of who the speaker is when looking at Prophetic works. Below I have placed the words expressing God’s view in red, and the other speaker in black, to allow it to be easily seen.

Next the question is what is the perspective? Is it the present looking at the future (i.e. from Isaiah’s time forward), or the future looking at the past? In the passage there are two perspectives, one are verses placed in the time of Isaiah telling about the future. These are in **bold**. Then, there are those that in the future reflecting a perspective of looking at the past events after they have occurred and trying to explain them. These are in *italics*. Now read the passage with the color/font coding and notice the immediate difference it makes:

52:13: Behold, My servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.

14: According as many were appalled at you—so marred was his visage unlike that of a man, and his form unlike that of the sons of men—

15: So shall he sprinkle many nations, kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them shall they see, and that which they had not heard shall they perceive.

53:1: ‘Who would have believed our report? And to whom hath the arm of the LORD been revealed?

2: For he shot up right forth as a sapling, and as a root out of a dry ground; he had no form nor comeliness, that we should look upon him, nor beauty that we should delight in him.

3: He was despised, and forsaken of men, a man of pains, and acquainted with disease, and as one from whom men hide their face: he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

¹ Ecclesiastes 12:12.

4: Truthfully, he bore our illnesses, and carried our pains: but we did consider him plagued, smitten of God, and afflicted.

5 But he was pained for our transgressions, he was oppressed for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his bruises we were healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray; everyone has turned his own way; and HaShem afflicted upon him (Alt. found him) the sin of us all.

7 He was oppressed, and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep silent before her shearers, so he did not open his mouth.

8 From prison and from judgment he was taken: and about his generation who would relate (about him)? He was removed from the living land: for the transgression of my people he was [lit. they were] stricken.

9 And he was given to the wicked for his grave, and with the rich in his death [lit. deaths]; for he did not do any violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

10: HaShem had pleasure to afflict him with disease; if he would offer his soul for his guilt, he would see his offspring, prolong his days, and that the desire of HaShem would succeed by his hand:

11: From his own toil he shall see and be satisfied; By his knowledge, my righteous servant will bring righteousness to many; and their iniquities he did bear.

12: Therefore will I divide him a portion from the many, and the mighty he shall divide as spoils; because he poured out his soul unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of the many, and for the transgressors he prayed.

In approaching the explanation of this passage what was of primary importance was to answer this question²: 'What is God's view? For that reason I concentrate first on those verses in red, which tell us directly what God was thinking in his actions to the servant.

Part one deals with 52:13 – 15. In that part, I first discuss the issue of 'context' and what that means to a commentator. Then I move to the main issue of explaining the first few verses. I point out an interesting fact, those three verses show a distinct similarity to verses 53:1-3 with the exception that 52:13-15 are God's own words, and 53:1-3 are those of the main speaker in Isaiah 53. A comparison of 52:15 and 53:1 show that they express the same idea from two different perspectives. 53:1 is first person, so the speaker there is the same one referenced in 52:15. But the one in 52:15 is the gentile kings and nations. This means that the speaker has to be the gentile nations. I then show how the context of Isaiah 40 – 66 forces us to say that the servant was Israel.

In the second part I deal with God's view of the suffering in verses 10-12. Here I show that we have no choice but to see this as referencing Israel in exile, and eventual redemption from exile.

² This is one my friend Tovia Singer poses many times in his lectures.

Then I move to the main body of the text, verses 4-9. I go through every one and see if the speaker there, the nations, really understood God's intentions as they appear in verses 10-12.

Finally I go through some of the objections made to the idea that Israel is the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. Most of them are seen to be based on a total misunderstanding of the basics of what is going on in Isaiah 53. This concludes this first part. The second part being an examination of Rabbinic writings related to Isaiah 53.

I am confident that anyone taking an objective approach to what I write and examining it without preconceived ideas will see that I have shown that there is no other option; the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 is Israel.

An Introduction to Isaiah 53

There is no passage in the Tenach which has had more written about it than Isaiah 53¹. Both Christians and Jews have destroyed many a forest in the effort to clarify what the Prophet was trying to say. The Christian view is quite easy to explain:

1. Christians believe in a Messiah who comes to suffer and die.
2. Isaiah 53 deals with a servant who suffers

Therefore, according to them, they are the same person.

There are many problems with the Christian interpretation as has been pointed out in Jewish responses², but it does have the advantage of simplicity. The Christian interpretation is pretty simple to understand, and that makes their exegesis simpler to explain. I think this paragraph sums up the problem Jewish Apologists face:

The traditional response of the Jewish community, which identifies the Servant with corporate Israel, is a complex contextual argument and not easily understood by the average Jewish person, who would take the passage at face value and view the Servant as an individual. In this instance, the argument for the gospel presents the simplest and most reasonable option for the identity of the Servant of the Lord.³

While simplicity is nice and it insures that the reader will easily understand ones point of view, it does not mean that the view is the truth. Likewise complexity does not imply error.

He does, however, point out a major failing in the presentation of the Jewish point of view in articles written from that perspective: There is little material that helps us understand **why** Jews understand Isaiah 53 as being about Israel (or the righteous as Rashi says) in a way that an average Jewish person can easily understand. The Jewish 'exegetical context'⁴ is not presented, nor is it understood by the average Jewish person. The articles/books written on this subject from the Jewish perspective concentrate on verses and counter verses and why the Jewish view is better and the Christian objections wrong, without presenting the 'whole picture' in a way that makes theological sense. What should be easy to understand is not. In this short paper I would like to remedy that lack. In two short papers to follow this, I will further expand the ideas from here to give a full explanation of Isaiah 53. In the end it will be easily understandable and explainable in less than 10 minutes.

In order to understand any passage in the Tenach we need to examine the various types of contexts in which the passage occurs and which effects our understanding of it. We also need to see if there are any parallel passages that might relate the same information with the subject being identified in a more explicit manner. Many works try to deal with that later point and I will certainly deal with that here in a brief but more general manner.

¹ When we talk about Isaiah 53 we really mean the passage starting from verse 52:13 through 53:12.

² Some of them will appear in this series of three articles on Isaiah 53.

³ Mitch Glaser in *The Gospel According to Isaiah 53*, Mitch Glaser and Darrell Bock, Kregel, 2012 page 27-28.

⁴ By 'exegetical context' I mean underlying beliefs, or facts that lead one to expect a passage to have an interpretation, or a limited number of possible interpretations or to place various interpretations outside of what is acceptable, because of being contradictory to this context..

I am not trying to explain every detail of every verse, nor answer every question that is asked about the Jewish interpretation. These three articles are just an introduction. In later articles I will deal with some of the questions asked about the Jewish interpretation that are not dealt with in these articles.

There are four general types of context that we can talk about.⁵ They are (in the order I will address them):

1. Exegetical Context
2. Historical Context
3. General Context
4. Literary Context

These make up the full 'context' of the passages. Without these it is very difficult to see the truth of the Jewish view. In so doing, I will explain some of the verses and answer some of the objections to the Jewish view.

Exegetical Context

The Exegetical context is made up of those assumptions or theological/religious ideas or facts that are presumed before one goes looking at the text. For Judaism they can be based on clear Biblical teachings. With reference to Isaiah 53, the Christian exegetical context is simple and well known. It is why most people in America when first looking at Isaiah 53 would think along Christian lines. It is based on the New Testament teachings that the Messiah needed to come to this world, suffer and die⁶. The application to Isaiah 53 is explicit in the New Testament, and obvious.

The Exegetical context in Judaism is more complex and based on ideas that are not always familiar to readers of the Tenach. However, when each factor contained in it is explained it sheds light on how Jewish interpreters can say what they do and why the Jewish rejections of the Christian view is in order.

The first contextual issue deals with the idea of what the Messiah is expected to do, or in this case NOT supposed to do. In another [article](#) I address the issue of a suffering/dying Messiah and show that in Judaism of the first century (and including up to today) there was no such concept.⁷ Neither Bar Kochbah nor any of the Messianic candidates in the 1st century taught he was going to suffer, die and come back⁸. It has been the same since then. With this idea alone we can understand why Judaism sees Isaiah in a different light than do Christians. There is no suffering/dying Messiah to look for, so the servant of Isaiah 53 needs to be someone else.

⁵ These four are my explanation although the last three appear in most if not all of the discussions of context in one way or another.

⁶ The New Testament claims that Jesus himself taught that the purpose of the Messiah was to suffer and die, but there is reason to doubt that. On the Cross the Synoptics have Jesus saying in Hebrew/Aramaic 'My God My God why have you forsaken me.' It is hard to understand why he would feel forsaken by God when he was fulfilling his God appointed Messianic destiny to suffer and die.

⁷ I have had discussions on this subject with many people; there really is not much controversy in it. One of those who I discussed with was a Professor in an Evangelical College, and while he does not agree with my understanding of Isaiah 53, he does agree that the conclusion of that article: Judaism had no idea of a suffering/dying Messiah, is correct.

⁸ One could also add some other Christian beliefs, like a virgin birth, co-divinity and incarnation.

It defies logic that all the Messianic pretenders misunderstood that their suffering and death were required rather than signs of failure. We seem to have here historical backing for the argument for this aspect of the Jewish exegetical context. Not only do we see a consistent historical application, but it predates the Christian one. Likewise, the Christian one can be challenged as being a revisionist version that is attempting to understand and redefine the failure of a Messianic pretender⁹. It can be seen as an ad hoc explanation for an incident that defies preconceived expectations.

The next important contextual issue is that of National Sin and Exile. This is a topic of considerable importance in Isaiah, especially from Chapter 40 on but at the same time it is rarely discussed in polemical literature. I am surprised how many times I find, in discussion with Christians, how difficult it is for Christians to comprehend this simple idea. The idea of the distinction between the individual and the nation is fundamental to an understanding of the Tenach in general and specifically Isaiah 40 -66.

The topic of Sin and Atonement is not one that can be summarized in a few short paragraphs, which is the space I have here for the subject. G-d willing, I will write a series of articles on the subject in depth, but for this article it will have to be sufficient that I outline the main issues.

To understand this idea we need to first address the idea of Individual Sin. This is much easier to understand than National Sin. Obviously an issue like this cannot be fully developed in a few paragraphs. My purpose here is to just introduce all the major concepts of Individual sin in order to compare/contrast it to National Sin.

The Biblical approach to individual sin is one of the clearest ways we can see the mercy and love of God for mankind. From the beginning with Adam and even more with Cain we see God's compassion and liberality in judgment¹⁰.

There are various categories of sins and some factors which effect their seriousness and also as to how they are punishable. A good way to categorize sins is to divide them based on the Biblical descriptions of the type of punishment that they require. The categories are: Criminal; Civil; Ritual and Religious. As to which category the sin is in will often depend on two factors: Intention and Witnesses. Intention means whether it was willful or unintentional. Witnesses means if there were two people who observed the act, or if there were not¹¹.

Criminal sins are those that require a death penalty or lashes. These require witnesses and intent, except for the case of unintentional murder, where the punishment is banishment to a city of refuge for a period of time. Intentional sins of this type can, in some cases, bring on the most severe 'Religious' punishment excision¹². Unintentional sins of this type can also at times require a sacrifice¹³, which I will shortly discuss.

⁹ There are a number of scholarly works on the idea of cognitive dissonance which can explain why early Christians 'invented' this new context. They include the classic work, 'When Prophecy Fails' by Festinger et al, 1956. 'Kingdom and Community the social world of Early Christianity' by John Gager, 1975. 'Expecting Armageddon' edited by Jon Stone 2000.

¹⁰ I have many times pointed out that on the basis of how God deals with Cain alone, he would never been chosen as a member of the Supreme Court.

¹¹ As I stated this is a complex issue and what I say here is the general rule, while we may find some exceptions this does not change the point being made here.

¹² This means the soul is separated from those of the rest of Israel and can involve early death.

¹³ This is the Korban Chatas, the main individual sin sacrifice.

Civil Sins are those that require monetary payment or an oath to require or absolve of the monetary obligation. These require witnesses to obligate the payment and if one is too poor to pay, one can be sold into servitude for up to 7 years to pay off the obligation. There is no difference between intentional and unintentional civil sins except in rare cases like when someone was watching another's property¹⁴. They also do not require sacrifices except in a rare case when one has lied about a theft of some sort¹⁵.

Ritual sins are those that require a sacrifice. There is a lot of confusion in this area. There are different categories of sacrifices. In general there are communal and individual sacrifices. The later, are the ones that an individual brings for various reasons.

These are in four basic groups: Olah which is a voluntary sacrifice; Shalamim which is also a voluntary offering, including the minchah which is a flour offering and the holiday sacrifices, including the Pesach sacrifice. These two are not for sins which is why they are voluntary.

The two for sins are Chatas and Asham and they are not voluntary. These two are quite limited in scope. There are four conditions for one to be required to bring a Chatas: 1. Violation of something God has explicitly said not to do. 2. It has an action involved. 3. It was unintentional¹⁶. 4. The willful violation makes one liable to excision¹⁷. The number of sins fulfilling these requirements is counted in the Mishnah¹⁸ and number in the 30s. Most of the Chatas sins are sexual sins like accidentally having relations with someone forbidden. For example, if someone comes home and has relations with his dog (or mother-in-law) thinking it was his wife; then he needs to bring a Chatas.¹⁹ Intentionally doing that act would bring a death penalty and/or excision but no sacrifice. The Asham sacrifice is also brought for a small number of sins²⁰. In all there are around 40 sins²¹ for which an individual is required to bring a sacrifice. From this we see that very few sins require a sin sacrifice.

Sometimes the issue of the Yom Kippur sacrifice for sins comes up. Doesn't that clear all sins? Actually it does not. Let's say one killed a person the day before Yom Kippur and there were witnesses. That would not eliminate the need for this person to be brought to justice. We see two clear cases where Yom Kippur does not help. If someone kills another accidentally he needs to go to the city of refuge and stays there until the High Priest dies²². If Yom Kippur comes before then it brings no 'atonement', he still stays there. The same is if someone is sold to servitude²³ he stays until seven years are up and does not go free after Yom Kippur. The same is with theft, damages and many other sins that could be mentioned.

The final category is 'Religious' sins. These are sins where the punishment is all up to God and there is nothing that human intervention can do about it. These are the punishments that require excision and those where one would have been required to have another punishment

¹⁴ See Exodus 22:6, 9-12

¹⁵ See Leviticus 5:1,4; 20-24

¹⁶ These three are learned from Leviticus 4:1

¹⁷ Numbers 15:27-31

¹⁸ Tractate Kerisus chapter 1.

¹⁹ There are also a number of communal sacrifices.

²⁰ See Leviticus 5 for a description of all of them.

²¹ This is out of the traditional category of 613 commands.

²² Numbers 35:25

²³ Exodus 21:1-2.

but there were no witnesses. For example, if Reuven kills Levi and no one saw it, there is nothing judicially that can be done to him. This is in the hand of God, and forgiveness comes through a direct appeal to God.

With regards to the actions of individual, King Solomon sums it up at the end of Ecclesiastes:

12:13: The end of the matter, all having been heard: fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole (purpose of) man. 14: For God shall bring every action to judgment; concerning every hidden thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.

In the end one is judged based on ones actions. God provides ways to repent for all sins, even when there is not a temple available²⁴. God's standard with men is not one of perfection as we see from Ecclesiastes 7:20: "For there is not a righteous man upon earth that does only good, and does not sin". Sinning does not stop one from being righteous, as all men sin. We see many people referred to as righteous in the Tenach without being absolutely sinless. Likewise, we see many references to righteous people in general in Psalms.²⁵

The idea of National Sin is one that is a little more difficult to understand. After all, nations don't sin, individuals do. So what type of standard is being used that lets us say that the Nation of Israel is sinful or righteous? That the nation can be considered sinful does not need proof as the words of the prophets in many places confirms this. Also, the righteousness of the nation can be seen in many places, like Isaiah 26:1: "Open the gates that the righteous nation that keeps faithfulness may enter in."

It is interesting that in the Tenach we see two standards being used. The first might be called the Prophetic Standard. Joshua 7 is a good example. There we see that God says the whole nation is sinful, and yet only one person had sinned. Isaiah 1:4 is one of many other similar examples of where a few who have sinned in specific ways causes the prophet to state that the whole nation is sinful. The prophets have always exaggerated the sinfulness of Israel in order to inspire the whole people to repentance.

On the other hand we have an Objective Standard, which is more balanced and in accord with God's compassionate nature. We see this in Numbers 23:21, 23 where Balaam states that Israel is sinless, but this is AFTER the sin of the spies when there were still alive many of those who had believed the spies and were being punished because of it. So even though there were many who had sinned, the nation was considered as without sin, in the objective sense.

If the nation sins, we see clearly what is to occur. In Joshua 7 they lose in battle, but this was, in fact, what we have seen predicted in the passage of the curses, in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. In those curses we see a progression of punishments that the nation is to suffer (as we actually see happening in the books of Kings and Chronicles), until a turning point is reached and they were finally exiled (again as the passages of the curses state.) In 2 Kings 24:3-4 we see that the exile was decreed because of the sins of King Menasha which appears to have been so bad that even the general wave of repentance in his son Josiah's

²⁴ After the temple's destruction we see 1 Kings 8, and Ezekiel 18 dealing with this issue.

²⁵ It should be noted that even in the New Testament we do not see that righteousness = sinlessness. In Luke 1:6 the parents of John are called righteous.

time, was not enough to change this. That was the 'point of no return' which made exile inevitable²⁶.

The purpose of exile and what causes it to end is also stated after the curses themselves. In Leviticus 26:41-42 and Deuteronomy 30:1-2, where the experience of the exile is to humble the people and through that they should repent and return to following God's commandments. Through this general humbling and repentance God returns to his people and ends the exile. This end is not just the exaltation of Israel, and of benefit to them, but it effects and benefits the whole world. Isaiah 11 is one of the many passages that tells us of what the effect on the whole world will be: World Peace (6-9) and Universal knowledge of God (9).

With this we can now answer one objection that is made to the servant being Israel. It is probably the one most stated. If the servant is Israel, how can Israel suffer for Israel?? This assumes that the speaker in Isaiah 53 is Israel, and as we shall see, that is not the case, but even if it were, the answer should be clear. As I just pointed out, Israel suffers exile to bring atonement for it's sins. That is what the exile is for! It is in truth a non-issue.

Historical Context²⁷

The historical context refers to when a particular passage was said, the timeframe it refers to and in what historical period it is set. Let's look at some examples. The book of Isaiah starts off saying:

1:1 The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

This places Isaiah and the delivery of his prophecies in a specific historical context. We can see the events of that period in 2 Kings Chapters 15 – 20, and in 2 Chronicles chapters 26 – 32. By examining those chapters one has the historical background for much of what will be said in Isaiah. Many passages require us to have this historical knowledge to fully understand what is going on. Let's use Isaiah 7 and the following chapters as an example. Verse 7:1 says:

7:1 And it was in the days of Ahaz the son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, king of Judah, that Rezin the king of Aram, and Pekah the son of Remaliah, king of Israel, went up to Jerusalem to war against it; but could not prevail against it.

The context here appears in 2 Kings Chapter 16 and 2 Chronicles chapter 28. Without reading these sources, it is impossible to see what is happening and what the meaning of the prophet's words are. They were said at a certain time and relate to events occurring at that time. We can do the same with most prophecies, and more or less gain some information that aids in the understanding of the text.

We can apply this to Isaiah 53. These verses were said sometime in that period, but more importantly we can see that there are two different periods in which the verses are set. 52:13-

²⁶ We have no idea what God's calculations are in this. We know neither when the point requiring exile is or when redemption is merited. This is one of the 'hidden things' referred to in Deuteronomy 29:28 where it says that the 'hidden things are for HaShem'.

²⁷ Translations in this section are from the 1917 JPS version, unless noted otherwise.

15, is set in the time when Isaiah is speaking, and refers to events that are to come in the future. While 53 from verse 1 on is placed in the future age, and reflects the past. This then changes from verse 10 back to the period of Isaiah and describes future events again (with a change of speaker). This historical perspective makes the interpretation of passages in the Tenach much easier.

General Context²⁸

The idea of the general context is what is usually meant when we say 'context'. For example, a verse in Psalms cannot be understood without understanding the full Psalm; what it is about, what the themes are etc. Sometimes the context for a verse (or passage) is part of a chapter, sometimes a few chapters and sometimes longer. In any case, a verse/passage cannot be understood clearly unless we examine its general context and see how it fits in to it.

In our case the general context is not so hard to pinpoint. It is generally agreed by scholars, religious or not, that Isaiah 40 – 66 is one unit. It is an extended prophecy said at one time with themes that follow from the beginning until the end. We see the major themes expressed in the first few verses:

40:1 Comfort, comfort My people, says your God. 2 Speak to the heart of Jerusalem, and proclaim to her, that her time (of exile) has been filled, that her sins have been forgiven; because she has received from HaShem's hand double for all her sins.

Here we see a few points: G-d is comforting the Jewish people in her long exile. They need comfort because they have given up hope. The exile has been so long and difficult it leads one to think there will be no end. The verse hints at two things that make the Jewish people (and others) feel that there will be no end. First Israel's sins are/were very great so that there is a question: could they be forgiven by the suffering of the exile? The gentiles claim they could never be forgiven. So Israel wonders: has G-d forgotten/forsaken them? The verse states that their sins have been forgiven and she is to be exalted. The second is that they wonder at the extent of the suffering in the exile, why it should be so severe? We see an indication that it was in some sense undeserved.

These ideas appear again and again in the chapters 40 through 66. For example in the very last chapter the prophet says this:

66:10: Be happy with Jerusalem, and rejoice with her, all those who love her, rejoice for her joy, all who mourned for her. 11: In order that you should nurse, and be satisfied with the breasts of her consolations, that you may suck out, and have enjoyment with the glow of her glory. 12: For HaShem says, Behold, I will spread peace over her like a river, and the honor of the Nations like a flowing stream, then you will nurse, you shall be carried on her sides, and play on her knees. 13: As man whose mother comforts him, so will I comfort you, and in Jerusalem you will be comforted.

In the chapters from 40 – 66 again and again this idea comes out: HaShem has not forgotten his people, they will be taken from exile and be exalted and rejoice again. I could bring many verses on this point from these chapters but let me bring two short passages that are not far

²⁸ Translations in the section are mine.

from Isaiah 53, and are among my favorite verses on the consolation of Israel. One in chapter 49 and the other Chapter 54:

49:14: And Zion said, "HaShem has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me". 15: Can a woman forget her child, or can she not have compassion on the son of her womb? She may forget, yet I will not forget you. 16: Behold, on the palms of my hands I have engraved you; your walls are continually before me. 17: Your children shall make haste [to return]; Your ruiners and your destroyers will leave you.

54:6: As a woman forsaken and depressed in spirit has HaShem called [for] you, and as a wife of ones youth who was despised says your G-d. 7: For a small moment I have forsaken you; but with great compassion I will gather you. 8: Because of a little anger, I have hidden my face from you for a moment; and with everlasting mercy will I show compassion on you, says your redeemer, HaShem. 9: As the waters of Noah will this be to me, just as I have sworn to hold back the waters of Noah from the world; so I have sworn not to be angry with you, nor to rebuke you. 10: For the mountains shall melt away and the hills be removed; but my mercy shall not depart from you, nor shall the covenant of my peace be removed, says the One who has compassion on you, HaShem.

Here we see clearly words of comfort and promise of eventual end of exile, return and exaltation. Just before Isaiah 53 in chapter 52 we have an introduction to Isaiah 53. There we see the second issue about the exile explicitly addressed together with G-d's words of comfort:

52:1 Awake, awake, clothe yourself in your strength, Zion; clothe yourself in splendid garments, Jerusalem the holy city; for there shall no more come into you the uncircumcised and the impure. 2: Shake yourself; rise from the earth and sit Jerusalem; break off the chains on your neck, captive daughter of Zion. 3: Because HaShem says, "You have been sold for nothing; without money you will be redeemed". 4: Because so says the Lord HaShem, "At first My people went down to Egypt to dwell there; and the Assyrians oppressed them for nothing." 5: "And now what do I have here", says HaShem? "My people are taken for nothing, those who rule over them praise themselves", says HaShem; "and continually, all day, My Name is blasphemed". 6: "Therefore My people shall know My Name; therefore in that day [they shall know] that I am the one who speaks: here I am. 7: How pleasant on the mountains are the footsteps of the one who brings words of peace, telling of good tidings, announcing salvation, saying to Zion, your God rules. 8: The voice of your watchmen; they shall lift up the voice, together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when HaShem shall return again to Zion. 9: Break forth, sing together ruins of Jerusalem: because HaShem has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem. 10: HaShem has bared His Holy Arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

Here we see clearly both issues expressed: Israel has not been forgotten, the exile will be ended and she will return in joy and be exalted. Secondly, the exile while decreed for the nation's sins, involved suffering that was undeserved. From this we can answer two questions raised all the time by Christians.

First: if Israel is the servant; how can we say that Israel is 'sinless'? The problem is that Isaiah 53 does not say the servant is 'sinless', just that the suffering was not deserved. This is what appears in Isaiah 52 explicitly about Israel's suffering in exile. There Egypt and Assyria are both mentioned as causing suffering for 'nothing'.

Second, how do we understand Verse 5²⁹? What kind of benefit or healing did the nations think they were getting by causing Israel to suffer? Here is my translation of it, based on the Hebrew.

But he was wounded from our transgressions, he was crushed from our iniquities, sufferings came to him for our peace, and with his wounds we were healed.

The verse explains that the nations made Israel suffer because they felt that peace and national healing would come from that. It is interesting to note that virtually all the banishments and persecutions were for those reasons. A few examples will suffice:

1. The holocaust occurred as the Nazis themselves said, to purify their land and get rid of that people that brought defeat on them in the First War.
2. The expulsion from Spain was to purify the land and end any conflict from having non-Christians in the land.
3. Today Iran proclaims their desire to slaughter the Jewish people and wipe out Israel in order to bring peace to the Middle East and the whole world.

I could bring many more examples, but I believe this shows the point. The suffering that occurred was undeserved, and caused by sinful nations who felt that they benefited by the persecution of Israel.

Literary Context

The literary context is the one that gets the most attention in polemical discussions in general and specifically with Isaiah 53, as this involves the examination of the specific wording of the passage, and comparison to other passages. Many times the contexts I outlined above are ignored and it is this context alone that the arguments are about; which leads to invalid conclusions. We also find, unfortunately, many of these arguments require assuming a conclusion and arguing backwards to it³⁰.

Let me bring two well known examples, one from the Jewish side and one from the Christian side and show how this faulty use of the literary context occurs. In them the conclusion is assumed and the argument is to build a literary context to support it. Then I will show how we can use the literary context, in conjunction with the other types of contexts, to build an understanding of Isaiah 53.

Before looking at them we should note that there are some pretty simple and universally accepted literary elements here. We can talk about a speaker, and the subject, the person

²⁹ I will return to this verse again in the third part of this series and deal with it in more depth.

³⁰ The Christian exegetical context from the New Testament many times produces arguments, especially with regards to Isaiah 53, that are argued backwards.

being spoken about. In this case the subject, the person spoken about, is the servant mentioned in 52:13 and is so throughout the whole of Isaiah 53. We find no argument about this among those who attempt to explain this in a literal manner. Likewise there is general agreement that the speaker of Isaiah 52:13-15 is G-d talking about His servant. We can look upon these verses as G-d's introduction to Isaiah 53. The speaker of Isaiah 53:1-9 is unclear and needs to be examined. It is the main point of contention here. After that the speaker is either G-d or Isaiah relating God's view, and there is not much difference content wise, nor is there disagreement on this.

Now there are two erroneous attempts at showing a literary context, which fail as proofs, and I want to look at them first, before discussing the real literary context here.

The first is one is from the Jewish side where the word 'servant' in Isaiah 52:13 is used to prove that it is about Israel. It is true that in the book of Isaiah³¹ this term does usually apply to Israel. But it is not used exclusively for Israel. The references to 'servant' in 43:10 44, 48:20, 54:17 65 and 66 are clearly Israel. However, some Jewish commentators see the servant in Isaiah 42:1 as the Messiah³². And 49:3 appears to be the prophet himself. While most of the uses of 'servant' in Isaiah do refer to Israel, does that mean 52:13 has to refer to Israel? Does it even have to apply to someone that Isaiah has already referred to as a 'servant'? Why are we so restrictive in this by saying it can only apply to someone Isaiah has already used that title with? Saadiah Gaon actually sees it as applying various prophets and even Moshe! None of these were previously mentioned in Isaiah as being a 'servant', but they do qualify for that title. The servant here could be (and does mean) Israel, but it does not HAVE to be Israel because the word 'servant' is used here and elsewhere in Isaiah. We need more information to make that case.

On the other side, I have heard Dr. Michael Brown try to argue that there is a 'progression' from a group usage of the word 'servant' to it applying to an individual, so that when we get to Isaiah 53, it has to mean an individual and not a group like Israel. This is factually in error because we have the singular in 42:1 and 49:3, but between these two are a number of instances of it referring to Israel. After 49 we also see Israel referred to as the servant. The meaning of a word is based on context and not some theoretical stylistic law, pulled out of a hat, to make an argument, as is done in this case. Likewise this argument has the same faulty logic as the above argument about 'servant', excluding any 'servant' not previously mentioned in Isaiah.

In both of these cases we really have a conclusion looking for an argument to support it. The only thing we can say about the word 'servant' being used here is that it excludes anyone who could not be considered G-d's servant. When we find out who is being talked about, one thing that needs to be true about that person is that he/they are worthy of the title of servant.

The next false start is the claim that since the servant is referred to in the singular that it must mean that it is not Israel. The flip side of this is the argument that because of two instances where the plural is used that means it has to be a group, i.e. Israel. Both of these are invalid arguments but for different reasons.

³¹ This is especially true in chapters 40 – 66.

³² Other options are Israel, the righteous of Israel, the prophet, or Cyrus.

That the nation of Israel is referred to in the singular throughout the Tenach is without doubt. It is done in Isaiah³³ and in many well known passages such as the 10 Commandments. The nation is constantly considered as a single whole³⁴, and so there is no problem saying that the subject here is Israel because the subject is referred to in the singular.

We have two cases where the subject is not referred to in the singular: verse 8 and verse 9³⁵. But this does not prove the case for the plural side for the servant. As Rashi has elsewhere pointed out³⁶ it is unusual, but we do see that authority figures are addressed at times in the plural, although a single person³⁷. Two examples he brings are from Genesis 39:20, where Joseph's (singular) master is referred to in the plural, and in Exodus 22:14, where a single owner is referred to in the plural. These are rare occurrences, and were we to follow the normal expectations in the verse there should be a plural subject. Usually a plural verb or noun will indicate multiple persons but as we see there are some exceptions. And these exceptions could support the singular here. Therefore the singular/plural argument fails to have the strength to provide the proof that we desire. It is a strong argument but not certain.

There are other linguistic arguments which are basically language games just like the two above; they provide comfort for the already convinced, but are not as strong as they would seem.

This leaves us a problem, how DO we decide who the servant really is? What can be gained from the literary context? The answer to that is: a lot. We need to look carefully at the context and see what it does tell us. After that we can look for other contextual clues to answer any open questions.

We do have some clues from the literary context that can be helpful. We already know that the servant from 52:13-15, is the same as 53:1-12. We also see that 52:13-15 is God speaking in a way of introduction to what will appear in Isaiah 53. If we examine 52:13-15, having in mind that it is God's introduction to Isaiah 53, and comparing it to Isaiah 53, we gain some clues.

If we look at the last three verses of chapter 52 and compare them to the first three verses of 53, we see something interesting. We see a repetition of the same points, with 52 having God as the speaker, and 53, another speaker, who we need to identify. Here are the verses³⁸:

52:13: Behold, My servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. 14: According as many were appalled at thee—so marred was his visage unlike that of a man, and his form unlike that of the sons of men— 15: So shall he startle many nations, kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them shall they see, and that which they had not heard shall they perceive.

³³ Isaiah 43.10; 52.1-2; 54.1

³⁴ Just consider the implication of National sin. How could we have such a thing if they were not considered as a single entity?

³⁵ Christian apologists have a number of interesting excuses for the plural forms, which I find unconvincing and appear forced not explaining why they should appear here in Isaiah just when this could be a disproof for them.

³⁶ Genesis 35:7

³⁷ My argument here is not that we should discount these plural forms. I actually believe they do indicate the plurality of the subject. It is just that they are too weak an argument to base ones interpretation on them.

³⁸ JPS translation.

53:1: 'Who would have believed our report? And to whom hath the arm of the LORD been revealed? 2: For he shot up right forth as a sapling, and as a root out of a dry ground; he had no form nor comeliness, that we should look upon him, nor beauty that we should delight in him. 3: He was despised, and forsaken of men, a man of pains, and acquainted with disease, and as one from whom men hide their face: he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Notice the similarities?

1. 52:13 says the servant will prosper, and in similar wording, so does the first part of 53:2.
2. 52:14 relates about the servant the same ideas of suffering as in 53:3 and the second part of 53:2.
3. And finally, in 53:1 we see the speaker proclaiming his wonder at something he had not anticipated, exactly as we see in 52:15.

Here we have a clear contextual clue for the speaker in Isaiah 53. In 52:15 God has identified who is wondering; it is the nations of the world! That forces us to say the speaker in Isaiah 53:1-9 is also the nations of the world. This is certainly a surprising result, but we have no choice on this unless we want to make appeals to things other than the context, or deny what the verses say.

This leads to a question I have had for a long time: in Christian exegesis we do not see that the speaker of Isaiah 53 is the nations. The Christian view is that Jesus dies not for Israel alone but for the sins of the whole world. If the speaker is Israel, their interpretation should be that the servant is suffering for Israel alone. There is no logical/Biblical implication from Israel to the whole world. Why do they not accept the speaker as the nations since it appears the obvious conclusion and also fits better with Christian theology?

I think that they cannot accept that the speaker of Isaiah 53:1-9 are the nations as the implication of 52:15 is that the nations are surprised at what happens to the servant, but Israel is not. So if the servant is the Messiah, as they contend, then factually it would probably be MORE of a surprise for Israel than for the nations. It would at least not be less of a surprise. This then causes a problem if they want to say the servant is the Messiah.

Solution

We have the speaker but we are still in search of the servant. The verses here give no clear identification, although there are some characteristics:

1. He is called a servant of God.
2. He has suffered.
3. He will be exalted.
4. This was unexpected by the nations of the world.

If we look at the discussion of the general context above, we see that point 2 and 3 are part of the main themes of Isaiah 40-66. Isaiah *only* discusses Israel in a context of suffering and exaltation in these chapters. Likewise, 1 easily applies to Israel as within 40-66 Israel is many times called a servant. This is a pretty strong indication that it is only Israel who is meant as the servant here.

The last point needs no support as it is an empirical fact that when Israel will in the end be exalted and returned to Israel, there will be a lot of people very surprised. There is no other person/group identified within Isaiah 40-66 who could fulfill all four of these points, except Israel.

When we expand our examination and look throughout the Tenach we see many examples where the suffering and eventual exaltation of Israel is mentioned explicitly. One example is in Psalm 44:9-26.

However, I think the best description in the Tenach that parallels Isaiah 53 is Daniel 7:7-27. Daniel reviews the main theme of Isaiah 53 and of chapters 40 - 66.

There we see:

1. The suffering of the holy ones³⁹ (Israel)
2. The eventual reestablishing of their kingdom.
3. We see in verse 13 a Messianic figure that comes AFTER the 'beast' is taken away, which is after the suffering of Israel has ended.
4. This Messiah DOES NOT SUFFER.
5. There is also no indication that the holy ones (Israel) are guilty or sinful.

All of these ideas mirror Isaiah 53, and other explicit Messianic passages, all following the Jewish interpretation.

Daniel 7:7: After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces, and stamped the residue with its feet; and it was diverse from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns. 8: I considered the horns, and, behold, there came up among them another horn, a little one, before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots; and, behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things. 9: I beheld till thrones were placed, and one that was ancient of days did sit: his raiment was as white snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and the wheels thereof burning fire. 10: A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him; thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the judgment was set, and the books were opened.

11: I beheld at that time because of the voice of the great words which the horn spoke, I beheld even till the beast was slain, and its body destroyed, and it was given to be burned with fire. 12: And as for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away; yet their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

13: I saw in the night visions, and, behold, there came with the clouds of heaven one like unto a son of man, and he came even to the ancient of days, and he was brought near before Him. 14: And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that

³⁹ Daniel 12:7 refers to nation of Israel as the holy ones as do a number of other verses.

all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.

15: As for me Daniel, my spirit was pained in the midst of my body, and the visions of my head affrighted me. 16: I came near unto one of them that stood by, and asked him the truth concerning all this. So he told me, and made me know the interpretation of the things: 17: 'These great beasts, which are four, are four kings, that shall arise out of the earth. 18: But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, even for ever and ever.'

19: Then I desired to know the truth concerning the fourth beast, which was diverse from all of them, exceeding terrible, whose teeth were of iron, and its nails of brass; which devoured, brake in pieces, and stamped the residue with its feet; 20: and concerning the ten horns that were on its head, and the other horn which came up, and before which three fell; even that horn that had eyes, and a mouth that spoke great things, whose appearance was greater than that of its fellows. 21: I beheld, and the same horn made war with the holy ones, and prevailed against them; 22: until the Ancient of days came, and judgment was given for the holy ones of the Most High; and the time came, and the holy ones possessed the kingdom.

23: Thus he said: 'The fourth beast shall be a fourth kingdom upon earth, which shall be diverse from all the kingdoms, and shall devour the whole earth, and shall tread it down, and break it in pieces. 24: And as for the ten horns, out of this kingdom shall ten kings arise; and another shall arise after them; and he shall be diverse from the former, and he shall put down three kings. 25: And he shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the holy ones of the Most High; and he shall think to change the seasons and the law; and they shall be given into his hand until a time and times and half a time. 26: But the judgment shall sit, and his dominions shall be taken away, to be consumed and to be destroy unto the end. 27: And the kingdom and the dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them.'

It is clear that the literary context points us to the fact of the speaker in Isaiah 53 being the nations. Taking into consideration the other contexts we must conclude that the servant is Israel, the suffering servant of God, who will be exalted.

Conclusion:

In this article I have shown that Isaiah 53 is about Israel's suffering in the exile at the hands of the Gentile nations and their eventual exaltation. This fits in with the themes of Isaiah 40 – 66 and the language used in Isaiah 52 and 53. It also is mirrored in other passages like Daniel 7. We have also examined the verses 52:13-53:3 and have seen how 52:13-15, spoken by God, and 53:1-3 spoken by the gentile nations are parallel verses, expressing the same ideas.

In my next article I will discuss Isaiah 53:10-12 where we see God's view and evaluation of the suffering of the servant, Israel. After that I will have another article on 53:4-9 and the Gentile nations' view and evaluation of the suffering of the servant, Israel.

While I have answered a number of important questions asked about the Jewish view, I have not answered all of them. I will, God willing, answer them either in the next two articles or in other articles I will compose directly dealing with them. We will see that the answers to the objections actually show support to the conclusions I have stated here rather than contradicting them⁴⁰. However, my main objectives in this article were to show:

1. Why Judaism sees the suffering servant as Israel.
2. That it is the only logical conclusion when we look at the text for what it says itself, without forcing it to fit a preconceived interpretation.
3. Explain the verses Isaiah 52:13-53:3.

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⁴⁰ As we saw with regards to Israel suffering for Israel, and how atonement for National Sin requires that.

A Summary of Isaiah 53 – God’s View

This article is the sequel to my previous article: An Introduction to Isaiah 53. It is the second part of a series of three articles. The previous article covered the contexts of Isaiah 53 and showed how it leads to only one conclusion: the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is Israel. This entailed an analysis of the contexts of the passage in general and a discussion of Isaiah 52:13 – 53:3.

Here I will first review the main points/conclusions of the previous article that need to be kept in mind for this article. Then I will give an explanation of Isaiah 53:10-12 which shows what God’s explanation is of the servant’s suffering and his rewards.

As I discussed in the previous article, all commentators, whether Christian or Jewish agree to the following points:

1. The servant throughout Isaiah 52:13 – Isaiah 53:12 is the same person¹.
2. There are three distinct parts with three different speakers.
 - a. 52:13 – 52:15 is agreed by all to be God speaking
 - b. 53:1 – 53:9 is a point of contention between Jews and Christians
 - c. 53:10 – 53:12 is the prophet relating God’s words.
3. 52:13-15 is God’s introduction to Chapter 53.

In the first article I pointed out that we have clear contextual clues that tell us who the speaker is in 53:1-9 and also who is the servant. As to the speaker I made the following points:

1. 52:13 says the servant will prosper, and in similar wording, so does the first part of 53:2.
2. 52:14 relates about the servant the same ideas as in 53:3 and the second part of 53:2.
3. And finally, in 53:1 we see the speaker proclaiming his wonder at something he had not anticipated, exactly as we see in 52:15.

Since verse 52:15 says explicitly that the ones who are wondering are the gentile kings and nations, this tells us that the speaker for 53:1-9 is the gentile nations.

As to the servant, by examining Isaiah 40 – 66 for who suffers and is exalted afterwards, the only conclusion, within the context of Isaiah 40-66, is that the servant is Israel².

From these conclusions we can see that there are four sections to Isaiah 53 as follows:

1. 52:13-15 – God’s introduction of the suffering and eventual exaltation of the servant (Israel) and the wonder of the nations at that.
2. 53:1-3 – The gentile nation’s recapitulation of what God has said in 52:13-15.
3. 53:4-9 – The gentile nation’s explanation of why Israel suffered.
4. 53:10-12 – God’s explanation of why Israel suffered.

¹ Obviously Christians and Jews have a disagreement as to who this servant is.

² This was reinforced by comparison to Daniel 7, which discusses explicitly the suffering of Israel at the hands of the nations and their eventual exaltation.

Parts 1 and 2 have been examined already in the first article, so we need to look at sections 3 and 4. To fully understand the words of the gentile kings of section 3 we need to first examine section 4 and see what God's view is. That will tell us how we are to understand what the gentile nations say in 53:4-9. The purpose of this article is to provide an analysis of those three verses.

* * *

What I would like to do first is to 'prove' the contention that what we have is God's view and that the speaker here is God, or the Prophet relating God's word³. There are a few reasons for this.

Grammatically, if we look at verses 1-8 they are always in the 1st person and the speaker is hidden. Verse 10 is in the third person and explicitly states that the view is God's. Verses 1-8 are clearly not those of God; and as I have shown in the first part of this series, they are the words of the gentile nations.

Verse 9 has the speaker talking about the servant in the third person as it is for verses 1-8, but the speaker is not clearly stated. However, because it is exclusively about what happened to the servant in the past; as the other verses 4-8 are; as opposed to being about the future rewards of the servant as 10-12 are; it seems clear that it belongs to the verses 1-8 and not to 10-12. I will discuss this verse more in the third part when I go over verses 1-9.

For these reasons it seems clear that verses 10-12 are the prophet relating God's view, and in fact verse 12 is a direct quote from God delivered by the prophet.

There are other reasons, based on the inconsistencies of the views stated in 10-12 and those in 4-8, that also lead me to believe that there has been a change in speaker. I will point these out as we discuss each of those verses in part three of this series of articles.

Let's assume for the moment that the speaker for 10-11 is also the same as 1-9⁴, I do not see this causing a change in the explanation of the verses that I wish to make here. What that would mean is that 1 – 11 is the word of the prophet relating the words of the nations with 1-9 (8) being their own view of the situation as they understood it, and 10 (9) – 11 being what they have learned from God as to what His view is. This may actually explain the meaning of verse 1, where the nations say they now know what they didn't know before. As I said, there are reasons to reject this, and I will note them as we go along⁵.

However we look at the identity of the speaker here, we need to understand that we are being told of what God's view of the suffering of the servant is. With that knowledge in hand we can look at verses 4-9 and see what the gentile nations have to say, and if the two views agree. That is what I will do in the third article.

* * *

³ The Jewish commentators see this as the prophet speaking and I follow that view. However as we shall see, who is relating God's is not a critical as the recognition that it is God's view of the servant, his suffering, and his rewards.

⁴ 12 cannot be the same speaker as it is in 1st person and it is God's view.

⁵ It should be noted that the Jewish commentators accept the first view. Rashi is ambiguous, but the other commentators understand him as following the first view, although there is nothing explicit in his words that contradicts the second view.

I will now proceed to verses 10-12 and one at a time to translate and explain them. The most important one is verse 10. When we have that right the rest will fall into place. Here is the translation:

53:10 HaShem had pleasure (Heb. יָשַׁן) to afflict him with disease; if he would offer his soul for his guilt, he would see his offspring, prolong his days, and that the desire of HaShem would succeed by his hand:

The biggest point of contention and possibly the key to this verse is found in the word here translated 'for his guilt', the Hebrew being 'asham'. According to the simple translation offered here, we see that the servant is suffering for his own sins. This would mean that the servant (Israel) has suffered in exile for its own sins. Such a view is certainly supported by a number of Biblical passages. The main ones being the curses that appear in Leviticus 26:14-45 and Deuteronomy 28:15-68.

There is another possible translation⁶, which is used by Christians, for these words: "if he would offer his soul for a guilt offering" (Heb. אָשָׁם). While Christians feel this supports their understanding of the chapter, I do not see it helping at all.

To understand why this does not help we need to examine what the Asham sacrifice is. The Asham is one of three types of sacrifices that are brought for sins. Why 'Asham' is the sin sacrifice being used as opposed to the others, gives us an insight as to what this prophecy is trying to teach us with regards to this servant and his suffering.

The three types of sacrifices that are for sins are: Chatas, Asham, and Olah. They have many similarities, but some significant differences. By analyzing these differences, we can see why Asham is used instead of the others.

First to assume that it is meant literally that the servant is an Asham sacrifice, as opposed to being a metaphor would seem obvious, we need only look at what sin sacrifices including Ashams require:

1. A sacrifice is an animal which is physically without blemish; a ram for the Asham (Lev. 5:14); a female goat for the Chatas (Lev. 4:28); male animals or birds for the Olah. (Lev. 1:3, 10, 14)
2. They are all slaughtered in the holy area of the temple and their blood is poured around the outside altar (Lev. 1:4, 4:30; 7:2)
3. Parts of the Asham and Chatas are burnt on top of the altar. All of the Olah is burnt there. (Lev. 1:7-8; 4:31; 7:3-5)
4. The Asham and Chatas must be eaten by the priests as opposed to the Olah. (Lev. 6:19; 7:6-7)

It seems pretty obvious from here that we cannot be referring to a person, or group of people that are literal sacrifices. Therefore the word 'Asham' here is not meant to indicate that the servant is a literal Asham sacrifice. This would seem to add support to the translation I have

⁶ This appears in the Radak, and is the one most Christians seem to support.

used. What we need to understand is what exactly is there unique to the Asham sacrifice that the prophet is trying to convey.

There are Christians who wish to say that the first point, of being unblemished, should apply to the servant and as such that would indicate that this servant was sinless and/or the most perfect of humans, as they contend 'unblemished' implies sinlessness and perfection. There are a few problems with this.

First, it seems contradictory to take 'unblemished' in a literal way but at the same time not require that the type of animal in some way correspond to the servant. It is an unblemished RAM, for the Asham. Unblemished describes the ram. They ignore what it would mean to be an unblemished ram; which is an animal without physical defects.

There is no requirement of 'perfection' in the animal brought for a sacrifice. We see this in two passages in the Torah. The first example deals with giving the tithe of one's animals. Were 'perfection' or the 'best' needed, that would apply for tithes also. However what we see is that such a requirement does not exist; the quality of the animal is not an issue. Here is Leviticus 27:32-33

32. Any tithe of cattle or flock of all that pass under the rod, the tenth shall be holy to the Lord.

*33. He shall not inspect [a tithed animal] for a **good or a bad one**, nor shall he offer a substitute for it. And if he does replace it, then [both] that one and its replacement are holy; it cannot be redeemed.*

So we see that an animal does not need to be the best to be holy and fit for God. Even more we see that for any animal qualified to be used as a sacrifice there is no 'perfection' condition. We see this in Leviticus 27:9-12 where we see the valuations of animals qualified to be used for sacrifices (including sin sacrifices.):

9. Now, if an animal of whose type is [fit] to be brought as an offering to the Lord, whatever part of it the person donates to the Lord, shall become holy.

*10. He shall not exchange it or offer a substitute for it, whether it **be a good one for a bad one, or a bad one for a good one**. But if he does substitute one animal for another animal, [both] that one and its replacement shall be holy.*

Here we see that it is acceptable to use an inferior animal, and one cannot exchange it for a better one! It is clear from this passage and the previous one that 'perfection' is not a sacrificial requirement.

With regards to sinlessness of the animal used for sacrifice, we see that this also is not required. We see this with regards to an ox, which gores either a man or an animal. If it kills a man it is considered liable and is given a death penalty, just as a man is:

*Exodus 21:28. And if an ox gores a man or a woman and [that one] dies, the ox shall **surely be stoned**, and its flesh shall not be eaten, and the owner of the ox is innocent.*

What we see is that the ox is judged as a human. In a sense, this animal is sinful. We see later a similar 'human' judgment regarding an ox with regards to another ox:

*Exodus 21:35. And if a man's ox strikes his friend's ox and it dies, they shall sell the live ox and divide the money received for it, and they shall also divide the dead body.
36. Or if it was known that it was a [habitually] goring ox since yesterday and the day before yesterday, and its owner does not watch it, he shall surely pay an ox for an ox, and the dead body shall be his.*

Now we see the ox punished just like a human sinner who had caused damages, by being sold. But the one who purchases it is not forbidden from using it for a sacrifice. There is no verse indicating that. Here we see that a 'sinful' ox is no unqualified to be used for a sacrifice. Since the animal does not need to be either sinless, or especially perfect, the servant also does not need to be sinless.

We are still left with the problem of why Asham is used and not Chatas or Olah. There are two more areas of difference among these sacrifices. First is the distinction between voluntary and obligatory sacrifices. While the Olah can be voluntary or obligatory, the Chatas and Asham are not; they are only obligatory. In verse 10 the actions of the servant are voluntary, so it is not this distinction that the verse is trying to bring out; since "Olah" should have been used if the voluntary nature of the sacrifice is the point here.

There is only one distinction where the Asham is on one side and the Chatas and Olah on the other. That is, an Asham is ONLY brought for an individual, for his own sins, that is not the case with either the Chatas or the Olah. Therefore, we need to say that the purpose of saying the servant was bringing an Asham sacrifice was for himself; to atone for his own sins. This is essentially what the original translation I used says. Because of this we are forced to say that this verse is teaching us that the servant has been put through this suffering to atone for his own sins.

* * *

We can now look at the whole verse and explain it and see how this can only apply to national Israel. There are essentially 4 parts to this verse:

1. *HaShem had pleasure to afflict him with disease*
2. *if he would offer his soul for his guilt,*
3. *he would see his offspring, prolong his days*
4. *and that the desire of HaShem would succeed by his hand*

What is interesting is that we see here not just what the servant is to do (or did), but how God feels about it. God is said to be pleased to cause this suffering. This is a great problem. While we can certainly understand God decreeing suffering⁷; that God finds enjoyment from it is not what we expect to hear. It seems to indicate a lack of compassion on God's part, for some reason. This first point is which I have not seen addressed in apologetic or polemical works. Where do we see that God has enjoyment in causing suffering of someone?

⁷ This would make more sense according to the Christian interpretation.

We can see this explicitly, ONLY if we accept that the servant is Israel suffering in exile for its sins. In the Torah there are two famous passages where God warns the Jewish people of what will happen if they disobey. One is in Leviticus 26 and the other in Deuteronomy 28. Here in Deuteronomy 28:63 we see exactly what Isaiah says here:

*Deuteronomy 28:63. And it will be, just as the Lord rejoiced over you to do good for you and to increase you, so will the Lord **rejoice over you to annihilate you and to destroy you...***

Here we have seen that God does rejoice when he is causing Israel to experience the suffering of the exile. The reason is that there is a purpose to the suffering, and only with this suffering can that purpose come about.

We also see in these two passages that the suffering is referred to as sickness:

*Leviticus 26:16. I will order upon you shock, consumption, **fever, and diseases** that cause hopeless longing and depression.*

*Deuteronomy 28:22. The Lord will strike you with consumption, **fever, illnesses with burning fevers, a disease** which causes unquenchable thirst, with the sword, with blast, and with yellowing, and they will pursue you until you perish.*

*Deuteronomy 28:60. And He will bring back upon you **all the diseases of Egypt** which you dreaded, and they will cling to you. 28:61. Also, the Lord will bring upon you every **disease and plague** which is not written in this Torah scroll, to destroy you.*

Now we know what is meant by the words: *HaShem had pleasure to afflict him with disease.* These are the punishments for not following God's law, of which the final one is exile.

The second part is also found with regard to the curses that the purpose of the suffering is for them to accept their sin and repent of it:

*Leviticus 26:40. They will then **confess their iniquity** and the iniquity of their fathers their betrayal that they dealt Me, and that they also treated Me as happenstance. 26:41. Then I too, will treat them as happenstance and bring them [back while] in the land of their enemies. If then, **their clogged heart becomes humbled**, then, [their sufferings] will gain appeasement for their iniquity,*

*Deuteronomy 30:1. And it will be, when all these things come upon you the blessing and the curse which I have set before you that **you will consider in your heart**, among all the nations where the Lord your God has banished you, 30:2. and you will return to the Lord, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, and you will listen to His voice according to all that I am commanding you this day you and your children, 30:3. then, the Lord, your God, will bring back your exiles, and He will have mercy upon you. He will once again gather you from all the nations, where the Lord, your God, had dispersed you.*

The purpose of the suffering, and why God has enjoyment from it, is that the people should recognize that it is coming upon them for their national sins, and to cause them to repent. It is interesting to note that only with regards to the Asham Sacrifice do we see an explicit command for the individual to confess his sin⁸:

*Leviticus 5:5. And it shall be, when someone incurs guilt in any one of these cases, that he **shall confess the sin** which he had committed,*

This is what it meant when it says: “if he would offer his soul for his guilt”; if Israel would accept the exile as punishment for her sins, confess their sins and accept that the suffering as coming from God and repent. For this God has joy. Through the exile Israel can come to atonement for her sins. The result of that will be that she will see the rewards:

*Deuteronomy 30:5. And the Lord, your God, will bring you to the land which your forefathers possessed, and you [too] will take possession of it, and **He will do good to you**, and He will make you **more numerous than your forefathers**. 30:9. And the Lord, your God, will make **you abundant for good in all the work of your hands**, in the **fruit of your womb**, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your soil. For the Lord will once again rejoice over you for good, as He rejoiced over your forefathers,*

This is what it means when it says: *he would see his offspring, prolong his days*. They will live in prosperity and have many descendants. The length of days can apply to the nation as a whole indicating they will not disappear, or to the fact that their life spans will be extended as it says in Isaiah 65:

17. For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the first ones shall not be remembered, neither shall they come into mind.

18. But rejoice and exult forever [in] what I create, for behold I create Jerusalem a rejoicing and its people an exultation.

19. And I will rejoice with Jerusalem, and I will exult with My people, and a sound of weeping or a sound of crying shall no longer be heard therein.

*20. There shall **no longer be from there a youth or an old man who will not fill his days**, for the youth who is one hundred years old shall die, and the sinner who is one hundred years old shall be cursed.*

21. And they shall build houses and inhabit them, and they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.

If one dies at 100 one is still called a youth! That is long life. And God will have enjoyment from them, as this verse ends: *and that the desire of HaShem would succeed by his hand*. As we see in Zechariah 14:16.

And it will come to pass that everyone left of the nations who came up against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to prostrate himself to the King, the Lord of Hosts, and to celebrate the festival of Tabernacles.

⁸ Although the Rabbis understand that this applies to all sin sacrifices.

* * *

Now we can turn to the next verse, which continues the rewards that the servant receives from God.

53:11 From his own toil he shall see and be satisfied; By his knowledge, my righteous servant will bring righteousness to many; and their iniquities he did bear.

There are three parts in this verse:

- 1. From his own toil he shall see and be satisfied;*
- 2. By his knowledge, my righteous servant will bring righteousness to many;*
- 3. and their iniquities he did bear.*

The first part is quite simple and needs little explanation after what we saw in the previous verse and the many verses about the exaltation of Israel that appear in Isaiah 40 – 66. The servant is basking in the rewards that God has bestowed as we saw in Deuteronomy 30 above. Most importantly this is the theme that continues in the very next chapter 54, which is about the great bounties that Israel will have after the exile has ended.

The second part refers to the knowledge of God that will be spread out over the world as Isaiah himself says in chapter 2:

2:2. And it shall be at the end of the days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be firmly established at the top of the mountains, and it shall be raised above the hills, and all the nations shall stream to it.

*3. And many peoples shall go, and they shall say, "Come, let us go up to the Lord's mount, to the house of the God of Jacob, and **let Him teach us of His ways, and we will go in His paths,**" for out of Zion shall the Torah come forth, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.*

The nations will come to Israel so that the Jewish people shall teach them the true knowledge of God. We see this idea a number of times in Isaiah. Here is from chapter 60:

60:1. Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has shone upon you.

2. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and a gross darkness the kingdoms, and the Lord shall shine upon you, and His glory shall appear over you.

*3. And **nations shall go by your light** and kings by the brilliance of your shine.*

4. Lift up your eyes all around and see, they all have gathered, they have come to you; your sons shall come from afar, and your daughters shall be raised on [their] side.

5. Then you shall see and be radiant, and your heart shall be startled and become enlarged, for the abundance of the west shall be turned over to you, the wealth of the nations that will come to you.

Verse 5 actually mentions something that we will see again in the next verse of Isaiah. This is why Israel is called a light to the nations in many places. When the end of the exile comes,

God's word, His Torah will spread out and people will be attracted to the Jewish people so that they should teach them righteousness.

The third part again is one that brings controversy, but it really shouldn't. The Hebrew word translated as bear (סבל) has connotations that the word 'bear' in English does not. It really means 'bear' in the sense of 'put up with'.

The meaning is simple. We can compare it to how Pharaoh acted to the children of Israel in Egypt. Although God decreed at the time of Avraham that his descendants were to be in slavery, He did not decree that they should go through the type of suffering that Pharaoh put them through. He was, in fact, a sinner and was so punished. Likewise here, Israel was required to be in exile for her national sin, but that did not justify the sins of the nations in their oppression of Israel.

Christians understand 'bear' with a nuance that is unique to the English word, but that does not help. They see bear as X sinned and the servant bears those sins, he raises them up, i.e. he atones for them by his suffering. The problem is with what we have learned in the previous verse. Since the servant is not sinless, and is suffering to atone for his own sins, how can the servant also atone for others? This is in fact an objection usually raised with regards to saying the servant is Israel. But the truth is that being responsible for one's own sins, to suffer in order to atone for them is understandable, and as I pointed out is Biblical. It is the purpose of the exile. But how can a sinful person who is suffering for his own sins also atone for someone else? Therefore the understanding of this part of the verse: *'and their iniquities he did bear'* must follow the implications of the Hebrew word to 'put up with' as opposed to the English nuance of 'atone for'.

* * *

The next verse we see God Himself reviewing the previous 2 verses and confirming what he has said:

53:12 Therefore will I divide him a portion from the many, and the mighty he shall divide as spoils(ללש); because he poured out his soul unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of the many, and for the transgressors he prayed.

This verse has six parts to it, and it is useful to look at each one of them:

- 1. Therefore will I divide him a portion from the many,*
- 2. and the mighty he shall divide as spoils(ללש);*
- 3. because he poured out his soul unto death,*
- 4. and was numbered with the transgressors;*
- 5. yet he bore the sin of the many,*
- 6. and for the transgressors he prayed.*

The first two points in this verse are usually ignored, but give significant supporting evidence to the contention that the servant is Israel.

That Israel will have an increase in physical possessions appears in many verses, especially in Isaiah 40 – 66. However there is some specific language here that indicates that these

possessions will come as spoils or plunder, not as a natural increase of wealth. That seems quite we strange.

However, we do find some passages where these possessions will be acquired as wealth taken/returned from the nations:

Here is an example from a passage from Isaiah 33:

33:21. But there, the Lord is mighty for us; a place of broad rivers and streams, where a galley with oars shall not go, and a great ship shall not pass.

22. For HaShem is our judge; HaShem is our ruler; HaShem is our king; He shall save us.

*23. Your ropes are loosed, not to strengthen their mast properly; they did not spread out a sail; **then spoils (ללש) were divided from the many; the lame takes the booty.***

*24. And the neighbor shall not say, "I am sick." **The people dwelling there are forgiven of sin.***

Here we see the same idea; when the redemption from exile comes, Israel's sins are forgiven and she will have the spoils from the nations. Likewise we find in Zechariah 14 after the horrible wars that come before the final end of the exile:

*14:1. Behold! A day of the Lord is coming, and **your spoils (שללך) shall you share amongst yourselves.***

*14:14. Judah will fight against Jerusalem! **And the wealth of all the nations round about-gold and silver and apparel-will be gathered in very great abundance.***

15. And so will be the plague of the horses, the mules, the camels, the donkeys, and all the animals that are in those camps, similar to this plague.

16. And it will come to pass that everyone left of the nations who came up against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to prostrate himself to the King, the Lord of Hosts, and to celebrate the festival of Tabernacles.

17. And it shall be that whoever of all the families of the earth does not go up to Jerusalem to prostrate himself to the King, the Lord of Hosts-upon them there shall be no rain.

And again we see described the same period in Ezekiel 39 after the war of Gog and MaGog:

39:9. Then the inhabitants of the cities of Israel will go forth and make fires and heat up with the weapons, the bucklers, and the encompassing shields, the bows and the arrows and the hand staves and the spears, and burn them as fires for seven years.

*10. So that they shall carry no wood from the fields nor cut down any from the forests, for they shall make fires from the weapons. **Thus will they spoil those who spoiled them, plunder those who plundered them** and says the Lord God.*

11. And it shall come to pass on that day that I will give Gog a place there as a grave in Israel, the valley of them who pass along the east side of the sea, and it will then stop those who pass along. And there shall they bury Gog and all his hordes, and they shall call it the Valley of Hamon Gog [the masses of Gog].

From these three passages, and others I could bring we see what was meant by:

Therefore will I divide him a portion from the many, and the mighty he shall divide as spoils

The ideas of 3 and 5 have already appeared in the previous verses so they should not be new. Israel is suffering in the exile and is persecuted by the nations who sinned by doing that:

because he poured out his soul unto death ... yet he bore the sin of the many,

Point 4 “*and was numbered with the transgressors*” appears as part of the ‘confession’ of the nations in verse 4, where a similar idea appears. I will discuss that verse more in the third part, when I discuss what the nations have to say about Israel’s suffering and compare it to what God has said about it.

The final point is also an unusual one that many do not seem to understand. But it is explicit in God’s instructions for the Jewish people in exile as it appears in the prophet Jeremiah 27:

27:5. Build houses and dwell [therein], and plant gardens and eat their produce.

6. Take wives and beget sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to men, and they shall bear sons and daughters, and multiply there and be not diminished.

*7. And seek the peace of the city where I have exiled you and **pray for it** to the Lord, for in its peace you shall have peace.*

This is what it says at the end of this verse; “*and for the transgressors he prayed*”, for the wicked nations who have sinned by oppressing Israel, Israel is required to pray for them.

Here we have seen that every point of this verse is reflected in other passages and promises from God to Israel and only to Israel.

* * *

In this second article I have shown how God’s view of the suffering of the servant agrees fully with the original analysis from verses 52:13 – 53:3. The servant is Israel, who had suffered at the hands of the gentile nations, and will in the end be rewarded with physical prosperity. For all of these ideas we have support from various passages in the Tenach. It goes without saying that there is ample historical support to verify the suffering the people of Israel have gone through. There is no other servant in the whole Tenach who has suffered to atone for his own sins, and is given such rewards from God in the end.

In the third and final article I will go through the verses 53:4 – 53:9, where we hear what the nations have to say.

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A Summary of Isaiah 53 – The Nations' View

We now come to the final part of this three part series of articles. It is interesting that this is what most of the discussion is about. When looked at properly, it is the least important. Whatever the seeming disagreements as to the meaning of the words that we find, they do not effect the essential issues in Isaiah 53. We all agree that Isaiah 52:13-15 and 53:10-12 are God's words/opinion. But for some reason everyone ignores those verses and just jumps straight into 53:4-9; ignoring what God had to say. They interpret the words of God based on what the speaker here is saying instead of the opposite.

In the last article I showed how God's view as stated explicitly in Isaiah 53:10-12 is that the servant, national Israel, is suffering in her exile for her sins, as stated in the Torah. The result of that suffering is national repentance and redemption from exile. This suffering is a process of purification to bring them to repentance and that after that time they will be redeemed from exile and receive great rewards. Some of these rewards will actually filter to the rest of the world who will follow the lead of the Jewish people as we point out from Isaiah 2:2-4, or as Isaiah says in chapter 11:

*11:9. They shall neither harm nor destroy on all My holy mount, for the **land shall be full of knowledge of the Lord as water covers the sea bed.***

We also have seen from my first article that in Isaiah 53:1-3 the nations do come to some type of realization of the truth with regards to Israel. In verse 3 they confess to having had a low regard for Israel. Now the big question is do the nations really get what was going on or not? We know what God has said. In 53:10-12 He makes clear what His intentions had been. In 4-9 we are going to see what the nations think God meant by this all. Do they fully comprehend what God's plan had been with regards to Israel being in exile or not?

There is one point we need to have in mind as we read the words of the nations. This is that while Israel was sent into exile by God for her national sins, that does not mean the nations were innocent for their actions. While the exile was necessary to bring Israel to repentance, the nations acted far beyond that which was desired by God. We see this from various verses in Tenach. In Isaiah 40 at the very beginning of the section 40-66, which deals with Israel in exile; God's comforting of His people in that exile and her eventual redemption, we find God saying:

*40:2. Speak to the heart of Jerusalem and call to her, her time has been completed, for her iniquity has been appeased, for she has taken from the hand of the Lord **double for all her sins.***

We see the same thing in the same context in Zechariah 1:

1:14. And the angel who was speaking to me said to me, "Proclaim, saying: 'So said the Lord of Hosts, I am jealous for Jerusalem, and for Zion-great jealousy.

*15. And **I am very angry with the nations** that are at ease, for I was angry a little, and they helped to do harm.'*

16. Therefore, so said the Lord: 'I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy; My house shall be built there,' says the Lord of Hosts. 'And a plumb line shall be stretched out over Jerusalem.'

Here we see that while God had decreed exile, the nations went far beyond what was required, and they aroused God's anger on themselves for that. This is very similar to the case of Israel in exile in Egypt, which was the result of the decree of God to Abraham. Yet because the Egyptians cruelty went well beyond what was needed to fulfill the prophecy of exile, they were punished and God showed mercy and love to Israel.

Because of the ambiguity of the language used in these verses in some places, it is possible to understand the verses differently, with two basically different views¹ as to the meaning. I will explain each verse in a way to bring out these two views. One view sees what happened to Israel as having been for their (the nations) benefit. Another view sees that they just hadn't understood what God intended, and because of that they sinned in their relationship to Israel. Although the first does not exclude the second, the opposite is not the case². As I go through the verses then they disagree we will look first at the view that indicates that the nations don't get it, and then we will look at view indicating they are remorseful and realize they were wrong.

Here is a translation of the verses 4-9. I have translated them in a way that the ambiguity is still there, and as I go through them I will point these ambiguities.

53:4: Truthfully, he bore our illnesses, and carried our pains: but we did consider him plagued, smitten of God, and afflicted.

5 But he was pained for [alt. by] our transgressions, he was oppressed for [alt. by] our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his bruises we were healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray; everyone has turned his own way; and HaShem afflicted upon him (Alt. found him) the sin of us all.

7 He was oppressed, and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep silent before her shearers, so he did not open his mouth.

8 From prison and from judgment he was taken: and about his generation who would relate (about him)? He was removed from the living land: for (alt. from) the transgression of my people he was [lit. they were] stricken.

9 And he was given to the wicked for his grave, and with the rich in his death [lit. deaths]; for he did not do any violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

* * *

53:4: Truthfully, he bore our illnesses, and carried our pains: but we did consider him plagued, smitten of God, and afflicted.

There are two parts to this that need to be explained:

- 1. Truthfully, he bore our illnesses, and carried our pains*
- 2. but we did consider him plagued, smitten of God, and afflicted.*

¹ Jewish commentators are mixed on this. The main ones like Rashi see the nations as hopelessly misinformed and that verses 10-12 are actually to correct their misunderstandings. Others see this as a confession of personal guilt by the nations to which 10-12 is further confirmation and clarification.

² It may even be possible that among the nations there are BOTH views and this ambiguity is here to reflect that. I have not seen this clearly in any commentary, but there are some things that may indicate this as being possible,

The first part: “*Truthfully, he bore our illnesses, and carried our pains*”; is seen differently by the two different views. The first view is that the nations, who don't get it; they see the suffering of Israel as substitution, and as atoning for them. Here they are saying: “We (the nations) have sinned and should have been punished, but Israel suffered in our place”. The second view sees that their actions were the cause of the suffering, and that Israel suffered from their sinful actions. As I pointed out in the second part of these articles ‘illness’ and ‘pains’ as refer to the types of suffering the nations afflicted Israel with in her exile.

The second part: “*we did consider him plagued, smitten of God, and afflicted*”; applies to both views equally. The nations confess that they considered Israel enemies of God. Whether these nations are Muslims who considered them Dhimmis, and distorters of God's original word in the Torah of Moses; or Christian who considered them rejected because Israel rejected Jesus and his message, both agreed to Israel's being cursed and their subjection being a sign of that. They thought that all of their suffering, even the holocaust, was for their sin of rejecting their religion. In a sense both miss the point. The suffering of Israel was not a curse, but a blessing from God to allow them to atone for their national sin.

* * *

53:5 But he was pained for [alt. by] our transgressions, he was oppressed for [alt. by] our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his bruises we were healed.

This verse is also in two parts as follows:

1. *But he was pained for [alt. by] our transgressions, he was oppressed for [alt. by] our iniquities*
2. *the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his bruises we were healed*

In the first part we see again how there are two views of the nations' understanding of Israel's suffering. First, those who still don't get it; they think that the servant, Israel, suffered in the place of them. In this case we read it as: *But he was pained (in place of us) for our transgressions, he was oppressed (in place of us) for our iniquities.*

The second view is that his suffering was the result of our (the nations') sinful actions. In this sense we read it as: *But he was pained (by us ;) by our transgressions, he was oppressed (by us ;) by our iniquities.* This means that they sinned and in so doing caused Israel to suffer.

In the second part we see the first view as understanding that by the servant, Israel, we (the nations) have had peace, physically and spiritually and were spared injury. According to the second view, this reflects the intentions that they had. We thought that by causing Israel to suffer we would have peace, and be spared from suffering God's anger. This is why Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492 and many other lands over the centuries.

* * *

53:6 All we like sheep have gone astray; everyone has turned his own way; and HaShem afflicted him (Alt. found him) with our sins.

In this verse there are two parts, one where both agree, and the other where they have a different perspective.

1. *All we like sheep have gone astray; everyone has turned his own way*
2. *HaShem afflicted upon him (Alt. found him) the sin of us all*

Both views see this first part; “*All we like sheep have gone astray; everyone has turned his own way*”; as an indication of how they were in error thinking Israel was cursed, and that God was desirous that the nations should oppress and kill Israel. They went their own way and never recognized the true God.

The second part: “*HaShem afflicted upon him the sin of us all*” is seen differently by the two views. The first sees it as meaning that God placed their sins on Israel and Israel suffered in order to bring a benefit; atonement. While the second sees it with the alternate meaning: “*HaShem found him with the sin of us all*”. The meaning being that God allowed our sins to find him; He allowed that we should sin and oppress Israel.

* * *

53:7 He was oppressed, and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep silent before her shearers, so he did not open his mouth.

Here both witness to the passivity of Israel over the centuries. From the time of the Bar Kochbah rebellion which tried to reestablish the Kingdom and the temple until the state of Israel was established, the Jewish people have suffered in many lands and at many times. In all those years, through persecution, expulsions, crusades, and outright slaughters, there are no examples before the 20th century of any attempts to make a military stand. Even in the second world war when 6 million were killed all over Eastern Europe there was barely any resistance to the Nazis. Millions got into ditches or on the trains and went to their death in Poland, Russia and Hungary without struggle.

* * *

53:8 From prison and from judgment he was taken: and about his generation who would relate (about him)? He was removed from the living land: for the transgression of my people he was [lit. they were] stricken.

Here we again see two parts.

1. *From prison and from judgment he was taken: and about his generation who would relate (about him)? He was removed from the living land*
2. *for (alt. from) the transgression of my people he was [lit. they were] stricken*

The first part; “*From prison and from judgment he was taken: and about his generation who would relate (about him)? He was removed from the living land*” there is agreement by both views. Both see this as relating the suffering that Israel had: imprisonment, judgments, exile (the living land is a euphemism for Israel) and death. Who could have understood at the time the true meaning of this?

The second part is again the disagreement with both views. The first view sees: "for the transgression of my people he was [lit. they were] stricken", meaning that they suffered for their sins. While the second view sees: "from the transgression of my people he was [lit. they were] stricken" meaning that Israel suffered by the sinning of the nations. The word מָלָא literally means 'to them', but either translation works as Israel is many times used in the singular.

* * *

53:9 And he was given to the wicked for his grave, and with the rich in his death [lit. deaths]; for he did not do any violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Here again they are both in agreement that this refers to Israel. Israel was considered wicked when they were killed, but they were innocent of what they were being persecuted for. Just like Pharaoh was wicked to persecute the Jewish people even though there was a decree of exile, so it was here. As we saw before they were not guilty of what they were being persecuted for. There was a decree of exile, but NOT of persecution and death. They should have been in exile as they were in Babylonia, in their own homes and in peace.

* * *

Here we see that all of what appears here conforms to what we have seen before, the only problems occur in how we interpret the views stated by the nations. Either they do not 'get it' and think that the punishment was to help them, or the more truthful view that it was just the sins of the nations that put Israel through this suffering, when their exile was supposed to be peaceful, and the nations are repentant for their actions.

We have now come to the end of this three part series. The conclusion is clear, there is no alternative we can only say that the suffering servant is Israel, who bore the suffering at the hand of the nations while in exile, and by so doing merited great rewards.

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Answers to Objections that Israel is the Suffering Servant¹

There are many objections brought by Christians in order to try and counter the idea that the suffering servant is Israel. Some of them deal with Rabbinic literature, which I have dealt with in a number of articles. Many of them deal with the text itself, and here I would like to go through the main ones. Many of these have already been countered in one or more of my three articles so it is a good idea to have read them first.

Many of these questions just arise because Christians have not taken the time to try and understand what the Jewish understanding of this passage really is. In the end of this article I touch on some of the Jewish problems with Isaiah 53 being about Jesus².

Objection #1: The pronouns are singular.

This is a very popular objection which is based on an error that shows the one asking this has no knowledge of Biblical Hebrew. Except for the two instances in verses 8 and 9 it is true that the pronouns are all singular. But as anyone who is familiar with the text in Hebrew can tell you, Israel as a nation is referred to in singular forms throughout the Tenach.

In fact in the chapters of Isaiah 40-66 alone we find this to be the case in 43:10; 52:1-2; and 54:1. It is hard to take this objection seriously as it is not based on the Hebrew text, but on English usage.

Objection #2: Israel is not innocent and the servant is righteous / innocent.

This is the #1 problem that Christians have with the Jewish interpretation of Isaiah 53. They claim that the servant in Isaiah 53 is innocent and so cannot be Israel because we all agree that Israel was in exile due to her sins. This objection has two parts to it, so let me address each one.

Israel is not innocent: Here they bring many verses like Isaiah 1 among many others. We have, of course, agreed that Israel was not sinless. However I pointed out in part two on the verse 53:10, the use of the Asham indicates that the servant was suffering in atonement for his OWN SINS, and not for others. Obviously the servant was a sinner. Likewise when discussing the Asham, I pointed out that this does not show that the person was sinless or perfect, as that was not a requirement of the animal itself.

The Servant had to be righteous: This is backed up by the words of Isaiah 53:4-6 indicating that the suffering was for the sins of others. But this does not change the facts that 4-6 are the words of the nations, and the view the Christians take on these verses is one that is false. As I showed in article three it is the nations, taking this view, who do not understand God's purpose in allowing the servant to suffer, as I explained in article two.

¹ The material in this article are taken from a number of sources: <http://www.chaim.org/nation.htm> ; <http://www.messiahnj.org/is53-rydel.htm> ; http://www.kingmessiahproject.com/rrj_not_about_israel.html . These are fairly representative of the objections that are made.

² Some of the problems have been alluded to in the previous three articles.

Sometimes verse 53:9 is mentioned but that refers to the servant being innocent of the suffering caused by the nations. Israel was to be in exile, but the persecution of the nations was not part of it, as I pointed out in the beginning of the third article.

Objection #3: Israel is not righteous because they have sinned.

The main problem is that many people are called righteous even if they have sinned; there is no contradiction in that. In fact Ecclesiastes 7:20 says that there is no one who is righteous who does not sin. Even John the Baptist's parents are called righteous in the New Testament and no one claims they were sinless.

With regards to the verse here we need to recall that God refers to Israel as being righteous in comparison to the nations as we see from the words of the prophet Balaam in Numbers 23:21: "He has not beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither has he seen perverseness in Israel...." Does God lie?

Objection #4: If the servant is Israel, Israel cannot suffer for Israel's sins.

I always laugh when I hear this one, as it seems to be taken as axiomatic that a person cannot effect his own atonement for sin. However this is a fundamental error in theology and it underlies this Christian objection. They believe that the one who has sinned needs someone else who had to be sinless himself to take his sin away. But this is an error. If one steals, he has to pay back what he stole and not someone else. And if he has no money HE is sold into servitude and not someone else. If he kills, it is HIS life that is forfeit. Even if he needs to bring a sacrifice, it is the sinner who pays his money to get the animal. HE must himself bring it to the temple and confess his own sins. No one can do it for him. Every sinner must take an active part in his own atonement process. Everyone has the responsibility of their own sins in this world, and they will be judged for their own sins in the next world.

Objection #5: Israel's suffering was NOT the result of the sins of the Gentile Nations.

If the meaning is that Israel did not suffer for the nations sins, so that they should be atoned for, then I agree and have so written. That view is only the false view stated by some of the nations as I pointed out in part three.

The true view of God, as I pointed out in part two, is that Israel goes through the exile as punishment for her sins. HOWEVER, God IS angry at the nations for their making Israel suffer in ways God did not want. For example, it may be that Jews in Europe needed to suffer the exile, but that did not mean God intended Hitler as his instrument.

Objection #6: The person in Isaiah 53 suffers dies and rises to atone for his people's sins.

I have always found this a most strange claim. The reason is that if we take it at face value according to the Christian interpretation that the speaker in Isaiah 1-9 is Israel then Jesus actually died ONLY for Israel!!

But I am sure that is not what they intended. As I pointed out in the third and second article that the servant suffers and dies for his own sins, it is only the erroneous view of some of the nations that Israel suffered for them.

There is no verse which tells of a resurrection. They need to manufacture this, because unless we are talking about an eternal people, who can be killed and suffer and still endure, the verses make no sense. This point is made clear in Psalms 44:23: "For your sake we are killed every day". Nobody but an eternal people can be killed daily and still exist.

Objection #7: Israel was violent and deceitful and that contradicts 53:9

Please see what I wrote about this in part three. The point of this verse is to contrast their suffering at the hands of the nations, and whether they deserved that the nations should make them suffer to the extent that they did. They were not as the nations themselves are confessing, and as I showed from Isaiah 40, and Zechariah 1. God is angry at the nations for causing suffering to Israel. It would seem that God being angry is a sign that this suffering was not what He had in mind.

Objection #8: The servant was silent and willing.

As I pointed out in part three from the time of Bar Kochbah until the Second World War, through hundreds of years of persecution, we do not find that the Jewish people as a whole ever resisted, but accepted the suffering. Even in WWII there were very few instances of any resistance. 6 million were killed in the camps and ghettos and other places, and one cannot find more than some thousands who took up arms.

One of the problems with this objection is if we take it as literally as the Christians do then Jesus clearly could not have fulfilled this. He was not silent in his trial. In John 18 he was downright talkative. What about his words on the cross? In Mark 15:33 he shows that he has lost faith in God and asks why God does not help him?

I think just as we could not disqualify Jesus for these few words, by saying he was not quiet, we cannot disqualify the nation of Israel who DID willingly accept the suffering; without losing faith in all but a few minor and inconsequential cases.

Objection #9: How could one say that God is pleased with Israel's suffering.

In verse 53:10 we see that God was pleased to cause suffering to the servant, and I quoted in part two from Deuteronomy where it says explicitly that God is joyful at the suffering. We see nowhere else where it is the case that God has joy in causing suffering I would like to point out we also have NO SOURCES where God has joy in the suffering of the Messiah.

Objection #10: 'my people' has to mean Isaiah's people: Israel.

As I proved in the first article the parallel wording and meanings of 52:13-15 and 53:1-3 show that the subject of 53:1-9 has to be the ones mentioned in 52:15, the nations. I also pointed out, that if this claim were true, then what they are really claiming is that what the Messiah did was ONLY for Israel.

Objection #11: The servant dies and is buried in verse 53:8

There is no reason to say this is not Israel, since in each generation the whole people die in exile. Psalm 44:23 which I mentioned above shows this point clearly. I also pointed out that there is no mention of a resurrection, so only if we are talking about a people as a whole can we say they suffer and die, and yet endure.

Objection #12: Israel has no 'knowledge'.

This is another bizarre claim. In Deuteronomy 4:6 it is clear that by 'knowledge' we mean the true knowledge of Israel which is God's Torah. And that is what is meant in verse 11, as I explained in part two.

Objection #13: When it says in verse 53:1 the word 'message' it means a prophetic message.

This is a bizarre one. It only makes sense in the English as in the Hebrew it is just false. The word there in Hebrew is שמעתנו which means 'what we have heard'. The root of the word is שמע 'to hear'. It is obvious that not everytime the word 'hear' appears are we talking of a prophecy.

Objection #14: 'the Land of the living' in verse 8 means death.

As I pointed out in my comments in part three, there is no problem with assuming death in that verse, but the correct translation of the Hebrew ארץ חיים is 'the living land', the extra 'the' (a 'heh' in Hebrew) does not appear. The same word as here appears in Ezekiel 26:30 where it refers to "and I shall set glory in the living land" (i.e. the land of Israel) It is a clear allusion to the exile by the nations, who are the speaker in that verse.

Objection #15: The word 'yazeh' (Heb. יזה) from verse 52:15 is translated wrong as 'startle'.

This really is not an objection of any substance as the JPS translation is NOT God's word; the original Hebrew is. Jewish commentators like Rashi see it as 'sprinkle' and relate it to Isaiah 63:3, where we see it refers to the spilling of the blood of the nations in the war before the end of the exile.

Objection #16: The word 'lamo' (Heb. למו) is not plural in verse 8.

The fact is that it doesn't matter if it is singular or plural as I mentioned in my first and third articles. However that being said, it is plural and should be understood as 'to them'. We do find that in translations it is found in the singular only because it sounds better to the ear. That is the way translators translate. I do it myself. The issue is really how do we make exegesis? The proper understanding of a verse and the words in it should depend on what the Hebrew (or Aramaic) actually means, and not what a translation has.

Objection #17: The word 'deaths' (Heb. מתי) is plural in verse 9

It is in the plural as almost all sources will agree to. The claim is that it can also refer to a single person. Although they may try to avoid the problem it presents to Christians it has to fit naturally in the verse. None seem to make a valid case, especially since Psalm 44:23 expresses the same idea.

Objection #18: 'zarah' (Heb. זרע) 'seed' means physical children.

The word 'zarah' refers to physical descendants, but Christians object to this. Some try to say that it can refer to disciples, but in all the cases we see this word used, there is physical relationship between X and its seed.

* * *

I have here tried to cover and point out the answers to the most serious of the common objections to the servant being Israel. None seems of much importance. They are explained away just by a correct understanding of the verses.

I also looked at some of the Jewish ones posed to Christians which present serious problems. I did this even though I believe that my explanations of Isaiah 53 in the three articles provides enough problems to show that it is untenable to maintain that Isaiah 53 is about anyone else then Israel.

The end of the matter is that we see only one possibility when we take into consideration what the passage Isaiah 53 actually says, and when looking at possible objections, The servant is Israel, who suffers in exile and will eventually be taken from exile to receive great rewards.

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