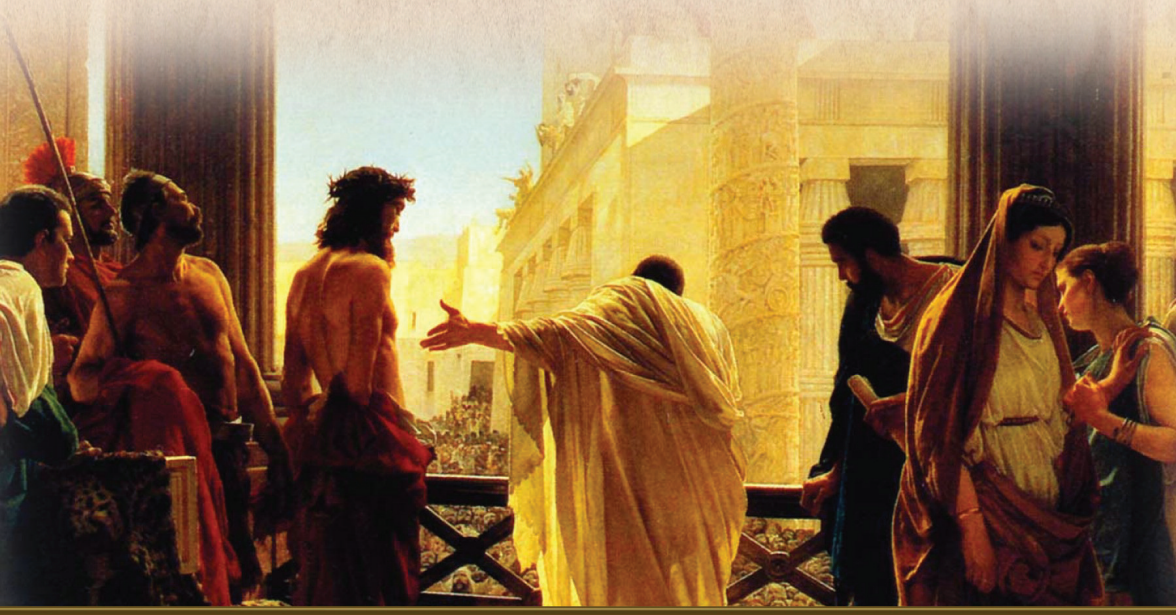
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The Isaiah 53 Prophecy

The Messiah As The "Suffering Servant"



MICHAEL FILIPEK

THE ISAIAH 53 PROPHECY

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

One of the most astonishing prophecies in the Bible is found in Isaiah 52:13-53:12. Written centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ, this passage presents an extraordinary prophetic portrait of the Messiah in His redemptive role as the "Suffering Servant." Isaiah describes a Servant of the Lord who would be despised and rejected, endure terrible suffering, be put to death for the sins of others, and afterward be exalted in triumph. The details are remarkable, especially when compared with the New Testament accounts of Jesus Christ's suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection. In fact, Isaiah 53 provides one of the most compelling prophetic testimonies that Jesus is the promised Messiah of Israel.

At the heart of this prophecy is an extraordinary revelation concerning the purpose of the Messiah's suffering. Isaiah tells us that the Servant would endure punishment, even though He Himself was innocent, and that His suffering would accomplish something far greater than anyone could have expected.

> But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

-Isaiah 53:5

Here, approximately seven hundred years before Christ, Isaiah prophetically describes the very purpose of the cross. The Messiah would suffer, but His suffering would be on behalf of others. He would bear the punishment for their transgressions and iniquities, providing the means by which sinful humanity could be reconciled to God. As the prophecy continues, we are told that this Servant would be led like a lamb to the slaughter, remain silent before His accusers, be cut off from the land of the living, and ultimately be buried. Yet incredibly, His death would not be the end of the story. Isaiah goes on to describe His continued life, the spiritual offspring resulting from His sacrifice, and His ultimate exaltation and victory.

What makes this prophecy even more remarkable is that elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Messiah is portrayed as a mighty King who will reign upon David's throne, restore Israel, judge the nations, and establish a worldwide kingdom of righteousness and peace (Isaiah 9:6-7; 11:1-9). These promises are just as important as the prophecies concerning His suffering. But how could the same Messiah be both a suffering, rejected figure who is put to death and a glorious King who triumphs over His enemies and reigns over the earth? Christianity resolves these seemingly contradictory prophetic portraits by recognizing two distinct Comings of the same Messiah. At His First Coming, Jesus fulfilled His redemptive mission as the Suffering Servant. At His Second Coming, He will return as the Conquering King, fulfilling the remaining promises concerning Israel's restoration and His righteous earthly Kingdom.

Of course, this raises an important question. How can we know that Isaiah 53 was actually written before the events it so precisely describes? If this passage had been composed or altered after the crucifixion of Jesus, its prophetic significance would be greatly diminished. Fortunately, the surviving manuscript evidence establishes that Isaiah 53 existed long before the Christian era. Among the most important discoveries is the Great Isaiah Scroll, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which preserves the entire book of Isaiah in a Hebrew

manuscript dating to approximately 125 BC. This provides powerful independent confirmation that the passage was already part of the Jewish Scriptures well before the birth of Jesus Christ.

But establishing the antiquity of Isaiah 53 is only part of the investigation. We must also determine the identity of the mysterious Servant whom Isaiah describes. Although Christians have long recognized this passage as a prophecy concerning Jesus Christ, a common objection within Judaism is that the Servant represents the collective nation of Israel rather than an individual Messiah. This interpretation appeals to the fact that Israel is identified as God's servant elsewhere in Isaiah. However, the broader context introduces an important difficulty for this explanation. Isaiah also describes a Servant whose mission is to restore Israel to God (Isaiah 49:5-6), who is despised by the nation (Isaiah 49:7), and who suffers for the transgressions of God's people (Isaiah 53:8). If the Servant is Israel itself, how are we to understand these distinctions? The answer requires a careful examination of Isaiah's larger prophetic message and the relationship between Israel and the individual messianic Servant who represents the nation and accomplishes what it could not.

Another important consideration is the historical Jewish understanding of this prophecy. The identification of Isaiah 53 with the Messiah was not an interpretation invented by Christians. Numerous Jewish writings and prominent rabbinical commentators throughout history have understood this passage in a messianic sense, including sources that explicitly connect the Messiah with suffering on behalf of others. This historical testimony is especially significant because it demonstrates that the messianic interpretation has substantial roots within Judaism itself. The extent of this tradition, and the reasons for the competing interpretations that developed, deserve careful examination.

The New Testament provides an additional and decisive consideration for Christians. Jesus Himself quoted Isaiah 53:12 and specifically declared that its words concerning the One who would be "numbered with the transgressors" would be fulfilled in Him (Luke 22:37). Likewise, when the Ethiopian official was reading Isaiah 53:7-8 and asked

the evangelist Philip whom the prophet was describing, Philip began with that very passage and preached Jesus to him (Acts 8:32-35). The earliest Jewish followers of Jesus understood His suffering and death in light of Isaiah's prophecy, recognizing that the events they had witnessed were the fulfillment of what God had revealed centuries beforehand.

Throughout this study, we will examine the manuscript evidence, the wider prophetic context of Isaiah, the historical testimony of Jewish interpreters, and the extraordinary details of the prophecy itself. We will also consider the major objections raised against its messianic interpretation and examine whether those objections can withstand a careful reading of the biblical text. As we will demonstrate, Isaiah 53 provides an astonishingly detailed prophetic picture of the suffering, death, atoning sacrifice, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus Christ. It reveals not only that the Messiah would suffer, but why He would suffer and what His suffering would accomplish. In doing so, it provides powerful evidence that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah of Israel, the Savior and Redeemer of all who place their faith in Him.

CHAPTER 2

ESTABLISHING THE ANTIQUITY OF ISAIAH 53

Before examining the remarkable details of Isaiah 53, we need to establish an important fact concerning the antiquity of this passage. How can we be certain that these prophetic words were actually written before the events they describe? After all, if Isaiah 53 had been composed or altered after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, its apparent prophetic accuracy would carry considerably less significance. Fortunately, we possess extraordinary manuscript evidence demonstrating that this passage was already firmly established within the Jewish Scriptures long before Christianity ever existed.

To examine this evidence, we can compare Isaiah 53 across three important textual witnesses: the Dead Sea Scrolls, the ancient Greek Septuagint, and the later Hebrew manuscripts of the Masoretic tradition. These sources span many centuries, providing an opportunity to investigate not only the antiquity of the prophecy but also how faithfully its wording was preserved over time. Of particular interest is whether the descriptions of the Servant's rejection, suffering for the sins of others, death, and ultimate vindication remained intact across these different manuscript traditions. We will begin with one of the

most important archaeological discoveries in the history of biblical scholarship: the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Great Isaiah Scroll and the Dead Sea Scrolls

One of the most important archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century occurred in 1947, when ancient Jewish manuscripts began coming to light from caves near Qumran, along the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. Among the original seven scrolls discovered was a remarkably well-preserved Hebrew manuscript of the book of Isaiah, now known as the Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa^{a}).

What makes this discovery so extraordinary is both the age and the completeness of the manuscript. The Great Isaiah Scroll dates to approximately 125 BC, more than a century before the birth of Jesus Christ. It contains all sixty-six chapters of Isaiah across fifty-four columns of Hebrew text, making it the oldest known substantially complete manuscript of a biblical book. The scroll is now preserved at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, which has made the manuscript available for public examination.[1]

The Great Isaiah Scroll provides direct physical evidence that Isaiah 53 was already part of the Jewish Scriptures more than a century before Jesus Christ was born. Its descriptions of the Servant's rejection, suffering for the sins of others, death, burial, and ultimate vindication were preserved in Hebrew long before the events recorded in the New Testament. This effectively eliminates the possibility that Christians later inserted these prophetic descriptions into Isaiah to make them correspond with the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, the Great Isaiah Scroll was not discovered in isolation from other ancient biblical manuscripts. Additional copies of Isaiah were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, most surviving in fragmentary condition. Biblical scholar Peter W. Flint documents twenty-two manuscripts of Isaiah discovered in the Judean Desert, including twenty-one from Qumran and another from Wadi Murabba'at.[2] These discoveries demonstrate the widespread copying and

importance of Isaiah within Jewish communities during the Second Temple Period.

This is particularly important because these manuscripts originated within Jewish society before or around the beginnings of Christianity. They provide evidence independent of the later Christian transmission of the Old Testament. In other words, Christians did not need to invent or insert the prophecies of Isaiah 53 into the Hebrew Scriptures after Jesus' crucifixion. The prophecy was already there, preserved within Jewish manuscripts that predated His birth.

The Septuagint – The Ancient Greek Translation

Another important witness to the antiquity of Isaiah 53 is the Septuagint (LXX), the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Following the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC, Greek became the dominant language throughout much of the eastern Mediterranean, including Egypt. Alexandria, in particular, became home to a large Jewish community, many of whom spoke Greek rather than Hebrew. This created a need for the Jewish Scriptures to be translated into Greek so that they could be read and understood by these communities.

According to the traditional account preserved in the *Letter of Aristeas*, during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (283-246 BC), the Egyptian king commissioned a translation of the Torah – the first five books of Moses – into Greek for the famous Library of Alexandria. Seventy-two Jewish scholars, six from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, were reportedly sent from Jerusalem to Alexandria to carry out this work. This tradition gave rise to the name Septuagint, meaning "seventy," from which the abbreviation LXX is derived.[3]

Although the traditional account contains details that cannot all be independently verified, the translation of the Torah into Greek during the third century BC is well established. Over time, other books of the Hebrew Scriptures were also translated, including the book of Isaiah, which scholars generally date to the second century BC.[4] Although our major surviving Greek manuscripts were copied centuries later,

the translation itself originated within Judaism long before Christianity emerged. This provides another important witness to the antiquity of Isaiah 53, demonstrating that the prophecy of the Suffering Servant was already being translated and circulated among Greek-speaking Jewish communities well before the birth of Jesus Christ.

The Masoretic Text – Examining the Preservation of Isaiah

The Masoretic Text is the traditional Hebrew text that serves as the basis for most English translations of the Old Testament. Its name derives from the Masoretes, generations of Jewish scribes and scholars who carefully preserved the Hebrew Scriptures, developing systems of vowel markings, pronunciation accents, and explanatory notes to help safeguard the text during its transmission.[5] Among the earliest surviving extensive manuscripts of this tradition are the Aleppo Codex, dating to approximately 930 AD, and the Leningrad Codex, completed around 1008-1009 AD.[6] Although the Aleppo Codex originally contained the entire Hebrew Bible, substantial portions of it went missing following anti-Jewish riots in Aleppo, Syria, in 1947, leaving the Leningrad Codex as the oldest surviving complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible.[7]

When these manuscripts are compared, they reveal that the Hebrew text of Isaiah remained remarkably consistent across more than a thousand years of transmission. Biblical manuscript scholar Drew Longacre describes the Great Isaiah Scroll as "almost word-for-word identical" to the medieval Masoretic text, preserving the same passages in the same order and with essentially the same wording.[8] The same prophecy describing the Servant's rejection, innocence, suffering for the sins of others, death, and ultimate vindication was already preserved in Hebrew more than a century before Jesus Christ was born. The overwhelming continuity between these manuscripts leaves no reasonable basis for suggesting that Christians later invented or inserted these descriptions into Isaiah.

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CHAPTER 3

IDENTIFYING THE SERVANT IN ISAIAH

Having established that Isaiah 53 was written long before the rise of Christianity and that its prophetic message was faithfully preserved across the centuries, we can now turn to the question of whom this remarkable prophecy describes. One of the most common objections raised by Jewish interpreters against the Christian understanding of Isaiah 53 is that the Suffering Servant represents the nation of Israel rather than an individual Messiah. After all, Isaiah repeatedly identifies Israel as God's servant elsewhere in the book. But how does Isaiah progressively reveal the Servant's identity and mission, moving from Israel's collective calling as God's servant to the faithful individual who represents the nation, restores it, and fulfills its intended purpose? To answer that question, we need to examine Isaiah's broader historical and prophetic context, beginning with God's covenant relationship with Israel and His promises to the nation, and then tracing how the identity and mission of the Servant progressively unfold in the chapters leading to Isaiah 53.

The book of Isaiah presents an extraordinary prophetic panorama of Israel's history and future, extending from the nation's rebellion and judgment to its eventual redemption and the establishment of the Messiah's Kingdom. Isaiah ministered during the eighth century BC,

primarily in Jerusalem, the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah. During this period, Judah faced the growing threat of the Assyrian Empire, which would eventually conquer and destroy the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC.[1]

Throughout the opening chapters, God repeatedly confronts His covenant people over their idolatry, injustice, and disobedience. Although Israel had been chosen to serve Him and reveal His righteousness to the nations, the people repeatedly abandoned the very God who had delivered them from Egypt and established them as His own. The failure extended to Judah's kings, many of whom were descendants of David entrusted with governing God's people but repeatedly failed to lead them in righteousness and obedience. Isaiah warned that this persistent rebellion would bring devastating judgment upon the nation, including destruction, desolation, and exile (Isaiah 5:13; 6:11-12).

Yet these prophecies of judgment were accompanied by extraordinary promises of future redemption. Isaiah foretold the coming of a righteous messianic King from the lineage of David, a Child who would be called "The mighty God" and "The Prince of Peace," whose government and kingdom would have no end (Isaiah 9:6-7). In Isaiah 11:1-5, this coming King is further identified as a descendant of Jesse, the father of David, upon whom the Spirit of the Lord would rest. Unlike the unfaithful kings who had led Israel into rebellion, He would rule with perfect righteousness and bring justice to the poor and oppressed. His reign would ultimately extend over a restored creation, and the nations themselves would seek Him (Isaiah 11:6-10). God's promises to Israel had not been abandoned, despite the repeated failures of the nation and its rulers.

Nevertheless, the immediate future held devastating judgment. By the end of Isaiah 39, the prophet announces that Babylon would eventually carry away Jerusalem's treasures and even descendants of the royal household (Isaiah 39:5-7). This judgment was fulfilled when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple in 586 BC,[2] and carried much of Judah's population into exile. From the standpoint of Israel's national history, the destruction of Jerusalem and the

downfall of David's royal dynasty might have appeared to place God's covenant promises in jeopardy. But as we enter Isaiah 40, the prophetic message takes a dramatic turn. Instead of announcing further judgment, God speaks of comfort, forgiveness, and restoration:

> 1 Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. 2 Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins.
>
> -Isaiah 40:1-2

Isaiah now looks ahead to Israel's deliverance from exile and the fulfillment of God's promises. The nation's judgment would not be the end of its story. God had not forgotten His people, nor had He abandoned His covenant with them. Yet the announcement that follows reaches beyond the return from Babylon. Isaiah introduces a voice calling for the preparation of a highway for the Lord Himself, whose glory would be revealed before all humanity:

> 3 **The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.** 4 Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: 5 **And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together:** for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.
>
> -Isaiah 40:3-5

This prophecy introduces the expectation of God's coming presence and the revelation of His glory before the nations. The New Testament later identifies John the Baptist as the voice crying in the wilderness (Matthew 3:3), preparing the way for the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, who revealed the glory of God (John 1:14; 2:11; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Hebrews 1:3). Consequently, from the Christian perspective, the Lord whose coming is announced in Isaiah 40 is the Messiah Himself –

God manifested in the flesh – as Isaiah had already foretold when he identified the promised child as "The mighty God" (Isaiah 9:6; cf. Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23; John 1:14). The connection becomes even more significant as the passage continues, describing the Lord's coming in terms of both royal authority and tender care for His people:

> **10** Behold, the Lord God will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him.
> **11** He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.
>
> -Isaiah 40:10-11

Here Isaiah brings together several themes that will become increasingly important as the prophecy unfolds: the coming of the Lord, the exercise of His royal authority, the revelation of His mighty arm, and His care for Israel as a shepherd tending His flock. Throughout Isaiah, the Lord's arm symbolizes His power to accomplish His purposes, particularly in delivering and redeeming His people. Yet as the prophecy develops, this imagery takes on a more personal significance, becoming closely associated with the coming messianic Servant through whom God would accomplish His redemptive work. For example, in Isaiah 52:10, the Lord declares that He will reveal His holy arm before all nations, and this imagery reappears in Isaiah 53:1, immediately following the introduction of the suffering and exalted Servant, where the prophet asks, "to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?"

These promises of the Lord's coming redemption raise an important question that Isaiah will address as his prophecy unfolds: How would God accomplish His redemptive purposes through a nation that had repeatedly rebelled against Him? The chapters that follow will explain God's purposes for Israel, the responsibilities He entrusted to the nation, and the introduction of a faithful Servant who would ultimately accomplish what Israel had failed to fulfill. Understanding this

progression is essential to identifying the Servant whose suffering and exaltation are described in Isaiah 53.

Israel's Calling – God's Chosen Servant

To understand the identity of the Servant in Isaiah 53, we must first recognize that Isaiah repeatedly identifies the nation of Israel itself as God's servant. This designation is rooted in God's covenant relationship with Israel, which began with His promises to Abraham. God promised to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation, give them a land of their own, and establish an everlasting covenant with them (Genesis 12:1-3; 17:7-8). Yet these promises were never intended to benefit Israel alone. From the beginning, God declared that through Abraham, "all families of the earth" would be blessed (Genesis 12:3). Israel's calling was therefore connected to God's much greater purpose of extending His blessings to the nations of the world.

Following Israel's deliverance from Egypt, God further explained this calling when He established His covenant with the nation at Mount Sinai. In Exodus 19:5-6, He declared that if Israel obeyed His voice and kept His covenant, the people would become His treasured possession and serve as "a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation." Just as the priests were responsible for serving God and making His ways known among the people, Israel was called to be a nation through which the surrounding peoples could come to know the true and living God. Its obedience, worship, and testimony were intended to demonstrate God's righteousness, holiness, and faithfulness before the world.

This calling did not originate in Israel's greatness or superior righteousness. As Moses explained in Deuteronomy 7:6-9, God chose Israel because of His love and His faithfulness to the oath He had sworn to their forefathers. Israel's privileged position was accompanied by tremendous responsibility, but the underlying promises rested upon the faithfulness of God Himself. This distinction becomes increasingly important throughout Isaiah, particularly as the prophet describes the

nation's repeated failures and God's continuing determination to fulfill His covenant promises.

Against this background, consider how God addresses Israel in Isaiah 41:

> **8 But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend.** **9** Thou whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called thee from the chief men thereof, and said unto thee, **Thou art my servant; I have chosen thee, and not cast thee away.**
>
> -Isaiah 41:8-9

Here the identity of the servant is unmistakable. God directly addresses Israel as His servant, identifies the nation as Jacob and the descendants of Abraham, and reaffirms His continued commitment to the people He had chosen. The designation refers to Israel collectively, even though God addresses the nation as a single servant. The following verse reinforces His faithfulness, promising that He will strengthen, help, and uphold His people (Isaiah 41:10). So, although the judgment and Babylonian exile Isaiah had foretold still lay ahead, God had not abandoned His covenant purposes for Israel.

The nature of Israel's calling becomes more apparent as Isaiah continues. Throughout chapters 41-48, the prophet presents an extended confrontation between the Lord and the false gods worshiped by the nations. At various points, God summons the nations and their idols to present their case, challenging them to demonstrate whether they possess any genuine knowledge or power over the course of history (Isaiah 41:21-24; 43:9). The Lord declares that He alone is the Creator, the sovereign ruler of history, and the only God capable of announcing future events and bringing them to fulfillment. His predictions concerning Israel's deliverance from exile, the overthrow of Babylon, and the role of the Persian king Cyrus in accomplishing these events would provide further testimony to His divine authority (Isaiah 44:28-45:3; 46:9-11; 47:1-5).

Within this confrontation, Israel occupies a central role as God's

chosen witness, entrusted with testifying to His mighty works, His faithfulness to His promises, and His absolute sovereignty over the nations. The nation had experienced His mighty acts of deliverance, received His commandments and prophetic revelations, and witnessed His faithfulness throughout its history. God now identifies Israel as the people through whom His identity and saving power were to be made known:

> **10 Ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen:** that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. **11** I, even I, am the Lord; and beside me there is no saviour. **12** I have declared, and have saved, and I have shewed, when there was no strange god among you: **therefore ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord, that I am God.**
>
> -Isaiah 43:10-12

God's words establish the relationship between Israel's identity as His servant and the mission He entrusted to the nation. Israel was to testify to the world that Yahweh alone is God, that no other gods exist beside Him, and that salvation belongs to Him. Through the history of this chosen people, the nations would witness God's sovereign power, His faithfulness to His promises, and His ability to accomplish everything He had declared. Israel was not chosen simply to enjoy a privileged relationship with God, but to serve as a conduit through whom His truth and glory would be made known and His blessings extended throughout the world.

Isaiah reinforces this national identification in several other passages. In Isaiah 44:1-2, God again addresses "Jacob my servant" and "Israel, whom I have chosen." Later, in verse 21, He declares, "I have formed thee; thou art my servant: O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of me." These repeated statements establish that the nation of Israel occupies a genuine and continuing place within God's redemptive purposes. Even when the nation comes under judgment

for its unfaithfulness, God remains committed to the promises He made concerning its future.

We have therefore established the first part of Isaiah's unfolding description of the Servant. Israel was chosen by God, entrusted with His covenant promises, and called to bear witness to His righteousness and salvation before the nations. But how faithfully did the nation fulfill this responsibility? Isaiah's answer will reveal the fundamental problem that prepares the way for the introduction of a different Servant – one who would accomplish the mission that Israel had failed to fulfill.

Israel's Failure – The Blind and Disobedient Servant

Despite the extraordinary privileges and responsibilities entrusted to Israel, the nation repeatedly failed to fulfill its calling as God's servant. From the very beginning of Isaiah, God confronts His people over their rebellion, describing them as children whom He had lovingly raised but who had turned against Him. In Isaiah 1:2-3, the Lord declares, "I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me." He then compares Israel's behavior to that of an ox and a donkey, which at least recognize their own masters, while His chosen people have failed to acknowledge and obey the God who delivered and sustained them. The nation that had been called to reveal God's righteousness to the world had itself become characterized by idolatry, injustice, corruption, and disobedience (Isaiah 1:4, 16-23).

Israel's failure was especially serious because the nation possessed the very knowledge and revelation that the surrounding nations lacked. God had revealed Himself through His covenant, His commandments, His prophets, and His mighty acts throughout Israel's history. Yet the people repeatedly disregarded His instructions while continuing to claim a special relationship with Him. Isaiah 29:13 describes their worship as outwardly religious but inwardly unfaithful, as the people honored God with their lips while their hearts remained far from Him. Their covenant identity had not

produced the obedience and righteousness that should have distinguished them from the nations.

This failure becomes particularly significant in Isaiah 42, where God directly identifies His servant as spiritually blind and deaf:

> **18** Hear, ye deaf; and look, ye blind, that ye may see. **19** Who is blind, but my servant? or deaf, as my messenger that I sent? who is blind as he that is perfect, and blind as the Lord's servant? **20** Seeing many things, but thou observest not; opening the ears, but he heareth not.
>
> -Isaiah 42:18-20

Israel had been chosen to bear witness to God's truth before the nations, yet Isaiah describes the nation itself as spiritually blind and deaf. Despite receiving God's revelation and witnessing His mighty works, the people repeatedly disregarded His instructions. The very servant called to reveal God's righteousness to the world had itself failed to live in obedience to Him.

The surrounding verses identify this disobedient servant as the nation of Israel and connect its condition directly to divine judgment. Isaiah 42:24 asks, "Who gave Jacob for a spoil, and Israel to the robbers?" The answer follows immediately: it was the Lord Himself, because His people had sinned against Him and refused to obey His law. Verse 25 describes God pouring out His anger upon the nation through the devastation of war, yet even these judgments failed to bring about the recognition and repentance that should have followed. Israel's suffering was not evidence that God had forgotten His covenant people. It was the consequence of their persistent rebellion against Him.

The same accusation continues in Isaiah 43. Despite identifying Israel as His chosen servant and witness in verses 10-12, God subsequently confronts the nation over its refusal to honor Him. In verses 22-24, He declares that the people had grown weary of Him, neglected their obligations, and burdened Him with their sins. Nevertheless, God promises in verse 25 that He will blot out their transgressions for His own sake. Israel had failed to remain faithful to its covenant

responsibilities, but God remained determined to accomplish His purposes for the nation.

Isaiah 48 develops this problem even further. Here God addresses those who bear the name of Israel and profess allegiance to Him, yet He declares that their religious profession is "not in truth, nor in righteousness" (Isaiah 48:1). He describes the nation as obstinate, comparing its unyielding stubbornness to an iron neck and a forehead of brass (Isaiah 48:4). God further declares that Israel's unfaithfulness was no recent development, but had characterized the nation from its earliest days (Isaiah 48:8).

This is particularly significant because Israel's exile was intended to bring judgment upon the nation for its disobedience. The people would experience the devastating consequences of rebellion and subsequently witness God's faithfulness in delivering them from their oppressors. Yet Isaiah reveals that even these experiences would not, by themselves, produce the faithful obedience that God required. The nation's fundamental problem extended beyond its political circumstances or foreign captivity. It was a spiritual condition rooted in its persistent refusal to submit to God.

Nevertheless, God's determination to fulfill His covenant promises remained unchanged. In Isaiah 48:9-11, He declares that He will restrain His anger and preserve His people for the sake of His own name and glory. The nation's unfaithfulness would bring judgment, but it would not ultimately defeat God's redemptive purposes or cancel His promises of Israel's future restoration. The Lord would accomplish what He had declared, even though the people He had chosen repeatedly failed to fulfill their responsibilities.

This brings us to an important distinction that begins to emerge within Isaiah itself. The nation of Israel is repeatedly identified as God's servant, yet that same servant is described as spiritually blind, deaf, rebellious, and disobedient. But earlier in Isaiah 42, God introduces another portrait of His Servant – one upon whom His Spirit rests, who faithfully carries out His will and brings justice to the nations. The contrast between these descriptions prepares us to understand how God would accomplish His redemptive purposes

through a faithful Servant who would succeed where Israel had failed.

The Faithful Servant – God's Answer to Israel's Failure

The contrast between Israel's unfaithfulness and the coming messianic Servant becomes apparent when we return to the beginning of Isaiah 42. Before describing Israel as a blind and disobedient servant in verses 18-25, God introduces His chosen Servant in entirely different terms. Unlike the nation that had repeatedly rejected His commandments, this Servant is portrayed as one who enjoys God's approval, is empowered by His Spirit, and faithfully accomplishes His purposes:

> **1** Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles. **2** He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. **3** A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth. **4** He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law.
>
> -Isaiah 42:1-4

Here God describes a Servant whose character and conduct stand in sharp contrast to the nation of Israel. Whereas Israel had repeatedly rebelled against God and neglected its responsibilities, this Servant is faithful, obedient, and entirely devoted to accomplishing the mission entrusted to Him. God declares that His soul delights in this Servant, that His Spirit rests upon Him, and that He will successfully establish justice throughout the earth. Unlike Israel, which had failed to fulfill its calling despite possessing God's revelation, this Servant would not fail or become discouraged until His mission was accomplished.

The Servant's mission is also international in scope. Isaiah declares that He will bring judgment to the Gentiles and establish justice throughout the earth. In this context, judgment refers to more than

the punishment of wrongdoing. It also concerns the establishment of God's righteous order and the extension of His truth and justice among the nations. The Servant will accomplish this work without the harshness or self-promotion commonly associated with earthly rulers. Isaiah illustrates His gentle and compassionate nature through two images: a bruised reed, representing a fragile stalk that has already been bent or damaged and could easily be broken, and smoking flax, referring to a lampwick whose flame has nearly gone out and could easily be extinguished. In other words, rather than crushing those who are already broken or abandoning those whose strength is nearly exhausted, the Servant will treat them with gentleness and compassion. Yet His gentleness does not imply weakness, for Isaiah declares that He will persevere until justice is established throughout the earth.

Isaiah 42:4 also declares that "the isles shall wait for his law." The Hebrew word translated "law" is *torah*, which can refer more broadly to teaching or instruction. Here the nations are described as awaiting the instruction of the Servant Himself, who will establish God's righteousness and justice throughout the earth. Yet elsewhere in Isaiah, Yahweh declares, "a law shall proceed from me," and that "the isles shall wait upon me" (Isaiah 51:4-5). What Isaiah attributes to the Servant in chapter 42 is therefore closely associated with what Yahweh attributes to Himself in chapter 51. This parallel further develops the portrait of the coming Messiah, whose authority and mission reflect those of Yahweh Himself, consistent with Isaiah's earlier revelation that the promised Davidic King would be called "The mighty God" (Isaiah 9:6).

This portrayal of a Servant who possesses divine authority, establishes justice, and brings God's instruction to the nations closely parallels Isaiah's earlier description of the promised Davidic King. In Isaiah 11:1-5, the prophet foretells a descendant of Jesse upon whom the Spirit of the Lord would rest, enabling Him to govern with wisdom, understanding, counsel, and righteousness. That King would judge the poor with righteousness, defend the meek, and ultimately establish justice throughout the earth. Isaiah 42 now describes a

Servant who likewise possesses God's Spirit and brings justice to the nations. The parallel between these passages identifies a consistent messianic expectation: God would raise up a faithful individual, empowered by His Spirit, who would accomplish what Israel and its unfaithful rulers had failed to do.

In the New Testament, Matthew 12:17-21 explicitly identifies Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of Isaiah 42:1-4, quoting the prophecy directly in connection with His earthly ministry. Matthew describes how Jesus withdrew from confrontation with the Pharisees, healed the multitudes, and instructed them not to publicize Him (Matthew 12:14-16). This fulfilled Isaiah's description of the Servant who would "not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street" (Isaiah 42:2). Rather than seeking public recognition or engaging in unnecessary confrontation, Jesus demonstrated the humility, gentleness, and compassion foretold of the Messiah. Furthermore, at Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon Him, and the Father declared, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:16-17). This corresponds directly to Isaiah's description of the chosen Servant in whom God delights and upon whom His Spirit rests.

As Isaiah continues, God expands upon the Servant's mission:

> **6** I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; **7** To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.
>
> -Isaiah 42:6-7

These verses introduce two closely related responsibilities. The Servant will be given as a covenant to the people, and He will serve as a light to the Gentiles. The promise concerning the covenant connects His mission with God's continuing commitment to His people, while the reference to the Gentiles extends His work beyond Israel to the surrounding nations. Through this Servant, God will accomplish His

purposes of redemption and make His salvation known throughout the world.

The promise that the Servant will open blind eyes is especially significant in the context of Isaiah 42. Earlier, the Servant is commissioned to bring light to those living in darkness. Later in the same chapter, however, Israel itself is condemned as spiritually blind and deaf. The nation entrusted with communicating God's revelation had become unable or unwilling to recognize and obey that revelation. The faithful Servant, by contrast, would bring light to those in darkness and accomplish the very mission that Israel had failed to fulfill.

This develops an important relationship between Israel and the coming Messiah. God's decision to accomplish His purposes through a faithful individual does not mean that He has abandoned the nation or transferred its covenant promises to another people. Rather, the Messiah will fulfill Israel's intended calling and become the means through whom God brings restoration to His covenant people and salvation to the nations. The fuller significance of this representative relationship will emerge in Isaiah 49, where the individual Servant is Himself called "Israel," even as He is commissioned to restore the nation.

Before arriving at that passage, however, we encounter another important development in Isaiah 48. As we have already seen, this chapter confronts Israel over its continuing unfaithfulness while reaffirming God's determination to accomplish His redemptive purposes. But then, like a lightning bolt out of nowhere, a new voice breaks into the prophecy in Isaiah 48:16:

> Come ye near unto me, hear ye this; **I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; from the time that it was, there am I: and now the Lord God, and his Spirit, hath sent me.**
>
> -Isaiah 48:16

A change of speaker becomes apparent when the voice in Isaiah 48:16 declares, "and now the Lord God, and his Spirit, hath sent me." In the preceding verses, Yahweh has been speaking directly, identi-

fying Himself as the first and the last and the Creator of heaven and earth (Isaiah 48:12-13). Yet now someone speaks as one who has been *sent* by Yahweh. But remarkably, this same speaker also identifies Himself *with* Yahweh, declaring, "I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; from the time that it was, there am I." These words recall Yahweh's earlier declarations that He has not spoken in secret (Isaiah 45:19) and that He has announced future events from the beginning (Isaiah 48:3). In other words, the speaker identifies Himself with the very God who has been revealing Himself and His purposes to Israel throughout its history. This is the voice of the coming messianic Servant, who speaks with the identity and authority of Yahweh Himself while declaring that He has been sent to accomplish His divine mission.

Isaiah has already prepared us for this revelation. Earlier, the prophet foretold the birth of a child called Immanuel, meaning "God with us" (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23). He also declared that a Son would be born whose names would include "The mighty God" and "The everlasting Father" (Isaiah 9:6). Isaiah 40 likewise announces the coming of Yahweh Himself, whose arm would rule for Him (Isaiah 40:9-10). This imagery is developed further when Isaiah introduces the Suffering Servant through the revelation of the "arm of the Lord" (Isaiah 53:1).

These prophecies reveal that the coming Messiah would be none other than *Yahweh Himself*, entering human history through the incarnation. The promised Servant would be God manifested in genuine human flesh, taking upon Himself the role of a perfect man to perfectly accomplish the work of redemption. His declaration that He has been sent does not diminish His divine identity, but anticipates the mission He would fulfill as the incarnate Messiah.

Having established the divine identity of the faithful Servant, another question remains: how does He relate to Israel, whom Isaiah also identifies as God's servant? Israel was chosen to represent God before the nations but repeatedly failed to fulfill that responsibility. The coming Servant, by contrast, is characterized by righteousness, obedience, divine approval, and the power of the Holy Spirit. His

mission is to establish justice, bring light to the nations, and accomplish God's purposes of redemption. Isaiah provides further insight into the relationship between this individual and the nation He represents in chapter 49, where the Servant bears Israel's own name while being commissioned to restore Israel to God.

The Representative Servant – Israel's Corporate Head Who Restores the Nation

Isaiah 49 further develops the identity and mission of the messianic Servant whose voice we encountered in the preceding chapter. Here He speaks at greater length, addressing the distant nations and describing the divine calling He received before His birth. Some have understood these words as Isaiah describing his own prophetic commission. Yet the mission assigned to this individual extends far beyond the prophet's personal ministry. God identifies Him by the name "Israel," even though the same Servant is subsequently commissioned to restore the nation of Israel to God and extend His salvation to the ends of the earth. These details reveal how the messianic Servant personally represents Israel while remaining distinct from the nation He is sent to restore. The opening verses read:

> **1** Listen, O isles, unto me; and hearken, ye people, from far; The Lord hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name. **2** And he hath made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me, and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he hid me; **3 And said unto me, Thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified.**
>
> -Isaiah 49:1-3

The Servant describes Himself as having been called by God from His mother's womb and prepared for a particular mission. His mouth is compared to a sharp sword, emphasizing the power and effectiveness of the words He has been appointed to speak. The imagery of a polished shaft concealed in God's quiver likewise portrays someone

specially prepared and reserved for His appointed purpose. Yet the most important statement for identifying this Servant appears in verse 3, where God declares, "Thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

Earlier in Isaiah, God explicitly identified the nation of Israel as His servant (Isaiah 41:8-9; 43:10). We have also seen how that nation repeatedly failed in its calling through spiritual blindness, disobedience, and unfaithfulness. Here, however, the name Israel is applied to the individual messianic Servant who will accomplish what the nation itself failed to achieve. The Messiah bears Israel's name because He represents the nation and embodies the faithful obedience and righteousness that God originally intended Israel to demonstrate before the world. **He is the true and consummate Israelite, the nation's representative through whom the purposes of Israel's calling will ultimately be fulfilled.**

The distinction between the Servant and the nation becomes even more explicit as the prophecy continues. Although the Servant acknowledges that His labor has appeared fruitless, He entrusts His work and its outcome to God (Isaiah 49:4). The following verses then reveal the mission for which He has been appointed:

> **5** And now, saith the Lord that formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the Lord, and my God shall be my strength. **6** And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth.
>
> -Isaiah 49:5-6

These verses establish a distinction that is essential to understanding Isaiah's Servant prophecies. The individual whom God calls "Israel" in verse 3 is now commissioned to bring Jacob (Israel) back to God, raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the preserved of Israel. The Servant cannot simply be equated with the nation as a whole,

because the prophecy distinguishes between the One commissioned to accomplish this restoration and the people who must be restored. Israel cannot accomplish her own restoration, particularly in light of the persistent unfaithfulness Isaiah has already described. The same individual who bears Israel's name is entrusted with accomplishing Israel's redemption on her behalf.

This is an example of the biblical principle of corporate representation, in which an individual serves as the representative head of a larger people and acts on their behalf.[3] Where Israel failed in its calling, He succeeds on her behalf, fulfilling the purpose for which God had chosen the nation.

Isaiah 49:6 also reveals that the Servant's mission extends beyond Israel. Restoring the nation is not the limit of His assignment, since God declares that He will also make the Servant "a light to the Gentiles," through whom His salvation will reach "unto the end of the earth." This recalls Isaiah 42:6, where the Servant was likewise appointed as a light to the Gentiles. The two aspects of His mission are therefore complementary: He will restore Israel to God while extending God's salvation to the nations of the world. Through the faithful messianic Servant, the original purpose of Israel's election – to serve as a conduit of God's blessings to the nations – will finally be accomplished.

This representative relationship must not be confused with the idea that Israel's covenant promises have been transferred to another people or that the nation has lost its place in God's purposes. To the contrary, Isaiah 49 continues by describing the future restoration of Zion and the gathering of her sons and daughters (Isaiah 49:14-23). Israel remains the people whom the Servant is commissioned to restore. His fulfillment of Israel's calling does not erase the nation's identity or cancel the promises God made to it. Rather, the Messiah is the very means through whom those promises will ultimately be fulfilled.

Yet the messianic Servant's mission would not be accomplished without opposition. Isaiah next reveals that the very nation He comes to restore will initially despise and reject Him (Isaiah 49:7). This

rejection introduces another important aspect of the Servant's mission, which Isaiah develops through His humiliation and suffering in the chapters that follow.

The Rejected Servant – The Messiah's Humiliation and Suffering

Thus far, Isaiah has portrayed the messianic Servant as God's chosen instrument to restore Israel, fulfill the calling in which the nation had failed, and extend His salvation throughout the world. Yet the prophet now introduces another remarkable aspect of His mission. Rather than being immediately welcomed by the people He has come to redeem, the Messiah will initially encounter their hostility and rejection. The very nation whose restoration depends upon His faithful obedience will despise the One appointed to accomplish its redemption. Isaiah now begins to reveal that the Servant's mission will involve not only the restoration of Israel and the salvation of the nations, but also His own personal humiliation and suffering. This unexpected development is introduced in Isaiah 49:7, where Yahweh addresses His chosen Servant:

> Thus saith the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, and his Holy One, **to him whom man despiseth, to him whom the nation abhorreth**, to a servant of rulers, Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of the Lord that is faithful, and the Holy One of Israel, and he shall choose thee.
>
> -Isaiah 49:7

Here Yahweh, identified as "the Redeemer of Israel, and his Holy One" (that is, Israel's Holy One), addresses the messianic Servant as One whom men will despise and whom the nation will abhor. In the context of Isaiah's prophecy, this rejection involves the very nation He has been commissioned to restore. Once again, the distinction between the individual Servant and national Israel is evident. The One appointed to accomplish Israel's redemption will Himself be rejected

by the people He has come to save. Yet this rejection will not be permanent, for the same prophecy also declares that kings and princes will eventually honor Him.

Isaiah 50 develops the Servant's rejection in much greater detail. The chapter begins with God confronting Israel over its continued disobedience, declaring that the people have brought judgment upon themselves through their own iniquities (Isaiah 50:1-3). Against this background of national unfaithfulness, the faithful Servant resumes speaking in verse 4, describing His obedience to God and the terrible mistreatment He will endure:

> **4** The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned. **5** The Lord God hath opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back. **6 I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting.** **7** For the Lord God will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed.
>
> -Isaiah 50:4-7

The contrast with Israel's repeated disobedience is especially important. While the nation continually resisted God's instructions, the messianic Servant declares, "I was not rebellious, neither turned away back." He listens faithfully to God, speaks the words He has been given, and remains obedient despite the hostility He encounters. His determination to fulfill His mission does not falter, even when that obedience leads to personal suffering.

Verse 6 describes this suffering in graphic physical terms. The Servant speaks of offering His back to those who beat Him, His cheeks to those who pull out His beard, and His face to those who subject Him to humiliation and spitting. These are the experiences of an individual who personally endures violence and degradation. Furthermore, the words "I gave my back" emphasize His willingness to endure this

mistreatment rather than abandon His mission. The Gospel accounts describe Jesus being beaten, mocked, scourged, and spat upon during the events surrounding His crucifixion (Matthew 26:67-68; 27:26-31), corresponding to Isaiah's prophetic description of the suffering Messiah.

Yet the Servant remains confident that God will ultimately vindicate Him. He declares that the Lord God will help Him and that He will not be ashamed (Isaiah 50:7). In the following verses, He challenges anyone who would condemn Him, resting His confidence upon the God who justifies and defends Him (Isaiah 50:8-9). His suffering is therefore not presented as the consequence of His own rebellion or moral failure. Unlike the nation, whose disobedience brought judgment upon itself, this Servant suffers despite His complete faithfulness to God.

Isaiah 50:10 further confirms the identity of this speaker by explicitly identifying Him as God's Servant and calling upon those who fear the Lord to obey His voice:

> Who is among you that feareth the Lord, **that obeyeth the voice of his servant**, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.
>
> -Isaiah 50:10

The suffering individual described in the preceding verses is therefore explicitly identified as God's Servant, whose words are to be heard and obeyed.

Having seen the rejection and terrible physical mistreatment that the Messiah would endure at the hands of His own people, we should also consider what Isaiah reveals about God's continuing relationship with Israel. Although the nation will initially reject the very Servant appointed to redeem her, this does not mean that Yahweh has abandoned His people or forgotten His covenant promises. Earlier in chapter 49, Isaiah describes Zion as a woman who fears that God has forsaken her. Yet Yahweh responds with a remarkable assurance of His unfailing faithfulness:

> **14** But Zion said, The Lord hath forsaken me, and my Lord hath forgotten me. **15** Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea, they may forget, **yet will I not forget thee.** **16** Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.
>
> -Isaiah 49:14-16

Although Israel has repeatedly failed in her calling and will initially reject the very Servant appointed to redeem her, Yahweh emphatically declares, "yet will I not forget thee." His reference to Zion's walls further reinforces that His promises concern the restoration of Jerusalem and the nation itself, a theme developed throughout the remainder of the chapter (Isaiah 49:18-23). The rejection of the Messiah by His own people will not bring God's covenant purposes for Israel to an end.

The Servant's rejection and humiliation, however, will not be the conclusion of His mission. The same prophecy that describes Him as despised by the nation also promises that kings and princes will eventually honor Him (Isaiah 49:7). The One who will endure such terrible suffering is also destined for extraordinary glory. As Isaiah's prophecy continues, the promised restoration of Israel and the extension of God's salvation to the nations lead us toward an even more remarkable revelation – that the very Servant who suffers such humiliation will ultimately be exalted above all.

The Exalted Servant – From Suffering to Glory

Although Isaiah has foretold the rejection and suffering of the messianic Servant, the prophet also makes it abundantly apparent that His mission will ultimately succeed. The suffering He endures will not prevent the fulfillment of God's promises. As we move through Isaiah 51-52, the prophetic emphasis turns toward the coming salvation of Israel, the restoration of Jerusalem, and the extension of God's righteousness and justice throughout the world. These promises prepare us for the remarkable announcement that the

same Servant who suffers rejection and humiliation will ultimately be exalted.

In Isaiah 51, Yahweh again addresses His people, assuring them that His righteousness and salvation are approaching. Yet His declaration also emphasizes that His redemptive purposes extend far beyond Israel:

> **4** Hearken unto me, my people; and give ear unto me, O my nation: for a law shall proceed from me, and I will make my judgment to rest for a light of the people. **5** My righteousness is near; my salvation is gone forth, and mine arms shall judge the people; the isles shall wait upon me, and on mine arm shall they trust.
>
> -Isaiah 51:4-5

Here Yahweh announces that His righteousness and salvation will reach the nations, declaring that even the distant islands will place their hope in His arm. This recalls the mission of the faithful messianic Servant, who was previously appointed to establish justice and become a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 42:1-7; 49:6). Once again, Isaiah brings together the restoration of Israel and the extension of God's salvation throughout the world. The imagery of Yahweh's arm recalls our earlier discussion of the coming Messiah as the manifestation of Yahweh's own saving power (Isaiah 40:10; 52:10; 53:1).

As the prophecy continues into Isaiah 52, the language becomes a triumphant announcement of redemption. Yahweh promises that His people will know His name, that Jerusalem will be restored, and that His salvation will be revealed before the nations. The prophet describes the announcement of this good news in vivid terms:

> **6** Therefore my people shall know my name: therefore they shall know in that day that I am he that doth speak: behold, it is I. **7** How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! **8** Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they

> sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the Lord shall bring again Zion. **9** Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the Lord hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem. **10** The Lord hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.
>
> -Isaiah 52:6-10

These verses portray the glorious fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. Yahweh begins by declaring that His people will know His name, emphatically identifying Himself as the One responsible for their coming redemption: "I am he that doth speak: behold, it is I" (Isaiah 52:6). This reinforces the connection we have already established between Yahweh's own saving work and the mission of the messianic Servant. Jerusalem is comforted and redeemed, Zion receives the announcement that her God reigns, and the watchmen rejoice as Yahweh restores His people. Yet this salvation is not confined to Israel, for Isaiah declares that "all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God." The redemption of Israel and the salvation of the Gentile nations remain inseparably connected within God's prophetic purposes.

Notice also the declaration that Yahweh has "made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations." Earlier, Isaiah identified the coming Messiah with the manifestation of Yahweh's own saving power, while the faithful Servant was commissioned to bring light and salvation to the nations. Now, immediately before introducing the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, the prophet once again emphasizes Yahweh's arm as the means through which His salvation will be revealed throughout the world.

But how will God accomplish this extraordinary redemption? How will the nation that repeatedly failed in its calling ultimately be restored, and how will God's salvation reach the ends of the earth? Isaiah has already identified the faithful messianic Servant as the One appointed to fulfill these purposes. Yet we have also learned that this Servant will be despised, rejected, beaten, and humiliated. The answer

to how His mission will succeed begins to unfold in the next prophetic announcement.

At Isaiah 52:13, Yahweh once again directs our attention to His chosen Servant. The prophecy begins with the promise of His ultimate exaltation, but immediately introduces the terrible suffering He must endure first. **What follows is the opening of the remarkable prophetic passage that continues through the end of Isaiah 53:**

> **13** Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. **14** As many were astonied at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men: **15** So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider.
>
> -Isaiah 52:13-15

These three verses introduce the extraordinary contrast that characterizes the entire prophecy. The Servant is destined for the highest exaltation, yet His appearance will first become terribly disfigured through suffering. This humiliation will give way to a glorious outcome that will astonish kings and reach many nations. Isaiah even describes the Servant as one who will "sprinkle many nations," language that recalls the sprinkling associated with purification and atonement under the Law of Moses (Leviticus 16:14-15). The precise significance of this imagery will become an important part of our examination of the prophecy.

Isaiah 52:13-15 therefore serves as the introduction to what is commonly called the Isaiah 53 prophecy. Although the familiar chapter division begins at Isaiah 53:1, the prophecy itself actually begins three verses earlier, here at Isaiah 52:13. Together, these verses announce the Servant's suffering, His ultimate exaltation, and the worldwide significance of His redemptive mission. Isaiah 53 then develops these themes in much greater detail, revealing the nature of His suffering and the purpose for which He must endure it.

Throughout Isaiah, we have now encountered two servants:

national Israel, chosen by God but repeatedly disobedient, and the faithful messianic Servant, the representative figure who bears Israel's name while remaining distinct from the nation He has been commissioned to restore. We have also seen that this individual possesses the identity and authority of Yahweh Himself, yet enters human history to fulfill His mission through genuine obedience, personal suffering, and ultimate triumph. With this prophetic background established, we are prepared to consider how Jewish interpreters have historically understood the identity of Isaiah's Suffering Servant before examining the remarkable details of Isaiah 52:13-53:12.

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CHAPTER 4

THE TESTIMONY OF JEWISH TRADITION

Having established the identity of the messianic Servant through Isaiah's own prophecies, we now turn to an important historical question: How did Jewish interpreters themselves understand Isaiah 53? Was the identification of the Suffering Servant with the Messiah an interpretation introduced by Christians after the death of Jesus, or was it already recognized within Jewish interpretive tradition?

This question is particularly important because Isaiah 53 is one of the most compelling messianic prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures, describing a figure who would be despised and rejected, endure terrible suffering, and ultimately bear the sins of others. Christians recognize these descriptions as remarkably precise prophecies fulfilled through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Yet within mainstream Judaism today, the passage is generally understood quite differently. Rather than identifying Him as an individual messianic figure, the prevailing interpretation regards the Servant as a symbolic representation of Israel itself, whose national suffering at the hands of the Gentiles is eventually followed by vindication and restoration.

But is this how Jewish interpreters have always understood Isaiah 53? Ancient and medieval Jewish writings preserve unmistakably

messianic interpretations of this prophecy. The Aramaic Targum of Isaiah explicitly identifies the Servant of Isaiah 52:13 as the Messiah, while the Babylonian Talmud draws upon Isaiah 53:4 when discussing the Messiah and His suffering. Other rabbinic writings likewise associate portions of this prophecy with the coming messianic figure. These are Jewish sources, produced within the very religious tradition that modern Judaism claims as its own. Their testimony demonstrates that the messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 is not exclusively Christian, but is deeply rooted in Jewish interpretive tradition itself.

Nevertheless, an alternative interpretation identifying the Servant with the collective nation of Israel also emerged within Jewish interpretation and eventually gained considerable prominence. The influential medieval commentator Rashi became one of its most important advocates, and this understanding has since become widely accepted within Judaism. But how did this interpretation come to occupy such a prominent position? Why did Jewish authorities who recognized the Messiah in Isaiah 53 arrive at conclusions so different from those commonly taught today? And to what extent might the centuries of religious controversy surrounding Jesus and His messianic claims have influenced the development and acceptance of competing interpretations?

The significance of Isaiah 53 is certainly not confined to historical debates among religious scholars. Jewish believers in Jesus have testified to the profound impact of encountering this prophecy within their own Scriptures. Jewish Christian author Dr. Mitch Glaser, in his book *Isaiah 53 Explained*, recounts the importance of this passage in helping Jewish readers reconsider the claims of Jesus as their promised Messiah.[1] For someone who has always been taught that Jesus cannot be the Messiah, discovering such a remarkable description of His suffering in the Hebrew Scriptures can raise questions that demand serious consideration.

In the pages that follow, we will examine the testimony of influential Jewish writings and commentators across the centuries, including the Targum, the Babylonian Talmud, the Midrashim, Maimonides, and several prominent medieval and later rabbis. We will also consider the

rise of the interpretation identifying the Servant as national Israel. By examining what these authorities actually wrote, we can establish that the messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 has deep roots within Jewish tradition and cannot reasonably be dismissed as an invention of Christianity. Readers can then consider for themselves what this historical testimony reveals about the identity of Isaiah's Suffering Servant.

The Isaiah 53 Servant Identified as the Messiah in Targum Jonathan

One of the most important early historical witnesses to the Jewish messianic interpretation of Isaiah's Servant prophecies is Targum Jonathan, the traditional Aramaic translation of the Prophets. A *targum* is a Jewish translation and explanatory paraphrase of the Hebrew Scriptures into Aramaic, a language widely spoken among Jews during the Second Temple period and afterward. These translations often went beyond a literal rendering of the Hebrew, incorporating explanations that reflected how Jewish interpreters understood particular passages.

Targum Jonathan is traditionally attributed to Jonathan ben Uzziel, a prominent student of the great Jewish sage Hillel. In fact, the Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 3a) itself credits Jonathan with the Aramaic translation of the *Nevi'im*, or "Prophets" – the second major division of the Hebrew Bible, which includes Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve Minor Prophets, and several historical books.[2] The Babylonian Talmud (Sukkah 28a) records that Hillel had eighty disciples and specifically identifies Jonathan as the greatest among them.[3] These accounts demonstrate how highly Jonathan was regarded within early rabbinic tradition. This makes the Targum traditionally attributed to him particularly significant when we examine what it says about the identity of Isaiah's Servant.

As we established in the preceding chapter, the prophecy commonly called Isaiah 53 actually begins at Isaiah 52:13, where Yahweh introduces His Servant and announces His ultimate exaltation. And when we examine how Targum Jonathan interprets this

opening verse, we find something remarkable: it explicitly identifies the Servant as the Messiah. It reads:

> **Behold, my servant the messiah** shall prosper, he shall be exalted and extolled, and he shall be very strong.[4]

This is no obscure Jewish witness or Christian interpretation imposed upon the Hebrew Scriptures. We are dealing with a messianic interpretation preserved in a work traditionally attributed to one of the most prominent figures of early rabbinic Judaism – powerful evidence that identifying Isaiah's Suffering Servant with the Messiah was not a Christian invention.

And this is not an isolated occurrence. Earlier in Isaiah, the same Targum explicitly identifies the faithful, Spirit-anointed Servant of Isaiah 42:1 as the Messiah. Similarly, in Isaiah 43:10, Targum Jonathan identifies Israel as Yahweh's witnesses while separately identifying His Servant as the Messiah.[5] This is especially significant because it demonstrates that the Targum recognizes the messianic Servant as distinct from the nation of Israel itself.

Although Targum Jonathan attributes some of Isaiah 53's descriptions of suffering to Israel rather than the Messiah,[6] other Jewish writings go even further in their messianic interpretation, directly associating the Messiah Himself with the suffering described in the prophecy. One particularly important example comes from the Babylonian Talmud.

The Isaiah 53 Suffering Messiah in the Babylonian Talmud

The Babylonian Talmud provides further evidence linking the Messiah with the suffering described in Isaiah 53. In Tractate Sanhedrin 98b, the rabbis discuss possible names for the Messiah, offering different names supported by biblical passages. One of these interpretations draws directly from Isaiah 53:4:

> The Rabbis said: His name is "the leper scholar," as it is written, Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him a leper, smitten of God, and afflicted.[7]

Why would the rabbis refer to the Messiah as "the leper scholar"? The answer lies in Isaiah 53:4, which describes someone who bears the griefs and sorrows of others, yet is regarded as "stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." The reference to leprosy reflects this description of a suffering figure, whom the rabbis explicitly associate with the Messiah.

This testimony comes from the Babylonian Talmud itself – one of the most authoritative works in all of rabbinic Judaism. How, then, can the suffering-Messiah interpretation be dismissed as an invention of Christianity when the rabbis themselves applied Isaiah 53:4 to the Messiah?

The Messiah's Suffering in Isaiah 53 According to Ruth Rabbah

Ruth Rabbah is a *midrash* – a Jewish rabbinic commentary that explains and interprets Scripture – devoted to the Book of Ruth. It provides another important testimony concerning the suffering Messiah. In Ruth Rabbah 5:6, the rabbis offer several interpretations of Ruth 2:14, where Boaz invites Ruth to eat bread dipped in vinegar – a practice the rabbis themselves describe as customary among harvesters. In one interpretation, they identify the vinegar as a symbol of suffering, applying it directly to the Messiah:

> The fifth interpretation [of Ruth 2:14] makes it refer to the Messiah. Come hither: approach to royal state. And eat of the bread refers to the bread of royalty; and dip thy morsel in the vinegar refers to his sufferings, as it is said, But he was wounded because of our transgressions [Isaiah 53:5].[8]

To explain the Messiah's suffering, Ruth Rabbah cites Isaiah 53:5,

applying the prophecy that He would be wounded for our transgressions directly to the Messiah. The passage then describes how His kingship will temporarily be taken from Him before ultimately being restored, citing Zechariah 14:2 and Isaiah 11:4. Therefore, we find that the Jewish rabbis themselves applied Isaiah 53 to a suffering Messiah who would ultimately reign as King.

Maimonides' Messianic Interpretation of Isaiah 53

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), also known as the Rambam, was one of the most influential Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages. Around 1172, he wrote his *Epistle to Yemen* to address religious persecution and confusion over a man claiming to be the Messiah. In explaining how the true Messiah would appear, Maimonides specifically applied Isaiah 53:2 to Him:

> What is the manner of Messiah's advent ... there shall rise up one of whom none have known before, and signs and wonders which they shall see performed by him will be the proofs of his true origin; for the Almighty, where he declares to us his mind upon this matter, says, "Behold a man whose name is the Branch, and he shall branch forth out of his place" (Zech. vi. 12). And Isaiah speaks similarly of the time when he shall appear, without father or mother or family being known, He came up as a sucker before him, and as a root out of dry earth, [Isaiah 53:2] … in the words of Isaiah, when describing the manner in which kings will harken to him, At him kings will shut their mouth; for that which had not been told them have they seen, and that which they had not heard they have perceived [Isaiah 52:15].[9]

Thus, Maimonides himself applied both Isaiah 53:2 and Isaiah 52:15 to the coming Messiah.

The Messiah in Rabbi Moshe Alshich's Commentary on Isaiah 53

Rabbi Moshe Alshich was a prominent sixteenth-century Jewish scholar and biblical commentator who lived in Safed, a city in the Galilee region that had become an important center of Jewish religious scholarship. He studied under the renowned Rabbi Joseph Caro, who later ordained him, and served as a judge in Caro's rabbinical court.[10] In his commentary on Isaiah 53, Alshich explicitly identifies the Servant as the Messiah and claims that this was the view commonly accepted by earlier Jewish rabbis:

> Our Rabbis with one voice accept and affirm the opinion that the prophet is speaking of the King Messiah, and we shall ourselves also adhere to the same view.[11]

Alshich was writing centuries after Rashi had advanced the interpretation identifying the Servant with national Israel. Yet Alshich continued to defend the messianic interpretation, expressly appealing to earlier rabbinic teaching in its support. He also described the Messiah as bearing the iniquities of Israel and receiving exaltation in connection with His suffering.[12] His testimony demonstrates that the messianic interpretation remained firmly represented within Jewish scholarship even long after the alternative national-Israel interpretation had gained influence.

The Isaiah 53 Messiah Bearing Our Iniquities According to Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas

Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas was a sixteenth-century Jewish scholar who lived in Safed and studied under the renowned Rabbi Moses Cordovero. He is best known for his influential work *Reshit Chochmah* (*The Beginning of Wisdom*), which addresses Jewish religious ethics and spiritual life.[13] In this work, de Vidas offers a remarkable explanation of Isaiah 53:5:

> But he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, the meaning of which is that since the Messiah bears our iniquities which produce the effect of his being bruised, it follows that whoso will not admit that the Messiah thus suffers for our iniquities, must endure and suffer for them himself.[14]

De Vidas goes beyond simply acknowledging that the Messiah would suffer. He explicitly teaches that the Messiah bears the sins of others and suffers on their behalf, while those who reject this interpretation must suffer for their own sins.

In sum, the historical testimony we have examined demonstrates that the messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 was firmly established within Jewish rabbinic tradition. These were not obscure sources or Christian commentators, but highly influential Jewish religious writings and respected rabbis who identified Isaiah 53's Servant with an individual Messiah, including His suffering and His bearing of the sins of others. How, then, can this interpretation be dismissed as a Christian invention? And if Isaiah's Suffering Servant was always intended to represent national Israel alone, why did so many prominent Jewish authorities understand the prophecy differently? These are questions that deserve serious consideration as we turn to a detailed examination of Isaiah 53 itself.

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CHAPTER 5

A VERSE-BY-VERSE EXAMINATION OF ISAIAH 53

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 presents an extraordinary prophetic portrait of the coming Messiah. The Servant is promised great exaltation and glory, yet He must first endure rejection, humiliation, terrible suffering, and death. Even more remarkable is the reason Isaiah gives for His suffering. The Servant is not being punished for His own wrongdoing, but instead bears the transgressions and iniquities of others. And although He will be put to death, the prophecy declares that His mission will ultimately succeed, bringing justification to many and resulting in His glorious exaltation.

These descriptions find their remarkable fulfillment in the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we examine this prophecy verse by verse, we will compare Isaiah's words with the New Testament accounts, beginning with the opening announcement in Isaiah 52:13-15. We will see how the prophet, writing centuries before the coming of Jesus, foretold not only the suffering and death of the Messiah, but also the redemptive purpose of His sacrifice and His ultimate victory.

Isaiah 52:13-15 – The Servant's Suffering and Exaltation

Isaiah begins this remarkable prophecy by announcing the ultimate exaltation of Yahweh's Servant, but immediately follows this promise with a description of His terrible suffering:

> **13** Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. **14** As many were astonied at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men: **15** So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider.
>
> -Isaiah 52:13-15

The prophecy opens with Yahweh declaring that His Servant will succeed in His mission and ultimately be "exalted and extolled, and be very high." Yet the following verse describes Him as suffering such terrible disfigurement that His appearance would astonish those who witnessed it. The word "visage" refers to His face or appearance, while "marred" describes the disfigurement He would endure. Isaiah therefore presents an extraordinary contrast between the Servant's humiliation and His ultimate glory.

Consider how closely this description corresponds with the Gospel accounts of Jesus' suffering. Following His condemnation before Pontius Pilate, Jesus was scourged, mocked, beaten, and led away to be crucified. Mark records the following:

> **15** And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified. **16** And the soldiers led him away into the hall, called Praetorium; and they call together the whole band. **17** And they clothed him with purple, and platted a crown of thorns, and put it about his head, **18** And began to salute him, Hail, King of the Jews! **19** And they smote him on the head with a reed, and did spit upon him, and bowing their

knees worshipped him. **20** And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple from him, and put his own clothes on him, and led him out to crucify him.

-Mark 15:15-20

The Roman scourging alone was an extremely brutal form of punishment. Added to this were the repeated blows to Jesus' head, the crown of thorns, and the physical abuse He endured before His crucifixion. These descriptions correspond with Isaiah's prophecy of a Servant whose appearance would be terribly disfigured through suffering.

But as Isaiah 52:13 had already announced, the Messiah's suffering would not be the end of the story. Through His resurrection, victory over death, and ascension into heaven, Jesus would be exalted far above all earthly and heavenly authorities. Paul describes His exaltation in Ephesians:

20 Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, **21** Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: **22** And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, **23** Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.

-Ephesians 1:20-23

Returning to Isaiah 52:15, we encounter another important statement concerning the Servant's mission: "So shall he sprinkle many nations." The language of sprinkling brings to mind the sacrificial system established under the Law of Moses, particularly the ceremonies associated with purification and atonement.

Under the Mosaic Law, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, known as Yom Kippur, and sprinkled sacrificial blood upon and before the Mercy Seat (Leviticus 16:14-15). This was part of the prescribed ceremony for making atonement for the

sins and uncleanness of Israel. The sprinkling of blood therefore carried an important association with purification and reconciliation with God.

But notice that Isaiah says the Servant will sprinkle "many nations." His redemptive work would extend beyond Israel to the Gentiles, bringing the blessings of salvation to people throughout the world. This corresponds with Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6, where Yahweh appointed His Servant to become a light to the Gentiles and bring His salvation to the ends of the earth.

The New Testament develops this connection between the Messiah, the priesthood, and the cleansing accomplished through His blood. The writer of Hebrews identifies Jesus as our great High Priest:

> Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.
>
> -Hebrews 4:14

Hebrews 9:13-14 further contrasts the purification associated with animal sacrifices under the Mosaic Law with the far greater cleansing accomplished through the blood of Jesus Christ. Peter likewise identifies the sprinkling of Christ's blood as part of God's redemptive work:

> Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied.
>
> -1 Peter 1:2

The imagery of cleansing through sacrificial blood also brings to mind another remarkable prophecy recorded earlier in Isaiah:

> Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.
>
> -Isaiah 1:18

This same imagery appears in Revelation, where John describes a great multitude standing before the throne of God:

> **9** After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; **13** And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? **14** And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.
>
> -Revelation 7:9, 13-14

Ordinarily, blood stains clothing rather than making it white. Yet here, the blood of the Lamb is presented as the very means through which these garments become white. The imagery expresses the cleansing and forgiveness accomplished through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. What the animal sacrifices of the Mosaic Law anticipated, the Messiah accomplished through His own blood.

Finally, Isaiah 52:15 declares that kings will shut their mouths before the Servant, astonished by what they will see and understand. The One who endured such humiliation will ultimately be recognized in His glory, and the results of His redemptive work will reach the nations of the world. Isaiah therefore opens this prophecy by announcing both the Messiah's terrible suffering and the glorious victory that will follow.

Isaiah 53:1 – Israel's Unbelief and the Arm of Yahweh

> Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?
>
> -Isaiah 53:1

Isaiah now raises two questions that anticipate the remarkable circumstances surrounding the coming Messiah. First, he expresses the difficulty many would have believing this extraordinary message. After describing a Servant who would endure terrible suffering and disfigurement, yet ultimately be exalted and bring salvation to the nations, Isaiah asks, "Who hath believed our report?" The question anticipates the unbelief and rejection that the Messiah would experience, particularly among His own people.

The Gospel of John directly identifies this prophecy as being fulfilled through the rejection of Jesus. Despite the many miracles He performed, a great number of His own people refused to believe in Him. John writes:

> **37** But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him: **38** That the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?
>
> -John 12:37-38

Notice that John explicitly quotes Isaiah 53:1 and identifies the unbelief surrounding Jesus as its fulfillment. The apostle Paul makes the same connection in Romans 10:16, where he quotes Isaiah's question while discussing those who refused to accept the Gospel.

> But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Esaias saith, Lord, who hath believed our report?
>
> -Romans 10:16

The rejection of Jesus was therefore not some unexpected development that undermined His claim to be the Messiah. It was part of the very prophetic picture Isaiah had already described.

The second question in Isaiah 53:1 introduces another important expression: "and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" Throughout Isaiah, the "arm of the Lord" represents Yahweh's strength, power, and ability to accomplish His purposes. In Isaiah

40:10, His arm is associated with His rule. In Isaiah 51:5, the nations are described as trusting in His arm, while Isaiah 51:9 recalls Yahweh's mighty acts of deliverance. Then, immediately before the Servant prophecy begins, Isaiah declares:

> The Lord hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.
>
> -Isaiah 52:10

Here, Yahweh's arm is directly associated with His salvation being revealed to the nations. And just a few verses later, Isaiah asks to whom that very arm has been revealed, immediately before describing the humble appearance, rejection, and suffering of the Servant.

At first, this might seem contradictory. The arm of Yahweh represents divine power and strength, yet the Messiah described in Isaiah 53 appears weak, rejected, and ultimately subjected to a humiliating death. But this is precisely how God would accomplish His greatest work of redemption. Through the suffering and sacrificial death of Jesus, followed by His resurrection and victory over death, sin, and Satan, Yahweh's saving power would be revealed in a way that few had anticipated. What appeared to be the Messiah's defeat was actually the means through which God accomplished His glorious victory.

Isaiah 53:2 – The Messiah's Humble Appearance

> For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.
>
> -Isaiah 53:2

Isaiah now describes the humble circumstances surrounding the Messiah's appearance. He compares the Servant to a tender plant growing out of dry ground – a young, fragile shoot emerging from soil that seems incapable of supporting life. The imagery suggests

someone who would arise under unlikely circumstances, without the outward strength, grandeur, or splendor people might expect from the promised Messiah.

Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets used similar imagery involving branches, roots, and plants to describe the coming messianic King. For example, Jeremiah foretold that Yahweh would raise up a righteous Branch from the line of David:

> **5** Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. **6** In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, The Lord Our Righteousness.
>
> -Jeremiah 23:5-6

Earlier, Isaiah had likewise used the imagery of a branch growing from the roots of Jesse, the father of King David:

> And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots:
>
> -Isaiah 11:1

These prophecies anticipate the coming Messiah as a descendant of David who would eventually reign in righteousness and restore Israel. This also reinforces the fact that the promised Messiah is an individual rather than the nation of Israel collectively, since He is specifically identified as a descendant of David, whereas the nation consists of people from many different tribal and family lines.

However, His royal lineage and future reign did not mean that He would initially appear with the splendor of a king. Isaiah 53:2 presents a very different picture of His arrival. Instead of appearing in obvious royal glory, He would emerge like a tender plant growing in barren ground. The historical circumstances of Israel provide a fitting background for this imagery. The nation had experienced centuries of covenant unfaithfulness, foreign domination, exile, and political

turmoil. The blessings and curses pronounced in Deuteronomy 28 had warned Israel of the consequences of abandoning its covenant obligations to Yahweh. The northern kingdom was conquered by Assyria, while Judah later fell to Babylon. Although the Jews were permitted to return from exile under Persian rule, the glorious Davidic kingdom of earlier generations was not restored.

In the centuries that followed, the Jewish people experienced further political upheaval under the Greek successor kingdoms. As we examined in our study of Daniel 11, Judea became caught between the competing Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt and the Seleucid rulers of Syria, whose wars repeatedly battered the region.[1] Eventually, the Romans extended their authority over Judea. By the time of Jesus' birth, the nation was living under Roman domination, far removed from the glory it had enjoyed under David and Solomon.

This period was also marked by the absence of the prophetic voices that had previously spoken to Israel. Following the ministries of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, Israel experienced approximately four centuries without the appearance of another biblical prophet before the coming of Jesus Christ. In fact, the Babylonian Talmud itself identifies these three as the last prophets and records that prophetic revelation departed from Israel after their deaths.[2] For generations, the Jewish people endured foreign domination and political turmoil without the prophets who had so often delivered Yahweh's messages to the nation. Yet it was from these seemingly barren circumstances that the promised Messiah would emerge – like a tender plant springing from dry ground.

Isaiah continues by declaring that the Servant would have "no form nor comeliness," and that there would be "no beauty that we should desire him." The word "comeliness" refers to an attractive or impressive appearance. The description emphasizes that the Messiah would lack the outward magnificence people ordinarily associate with kings and powerful rulers. He would not distinguish Himself through royal wealth, outward splendor, or an impressive social position. His appearance and circumstances would give people little reason to recognize Him as the long-awaited King of Israel.

This corresponds remarkably with the humble beginnings of Jesus Christ. Although He was born into the royal line of David, He did not enter the world in a palace or surrounded by the wealth and privilege of royalty. Instead, Luke records the following concerning His birth:

> And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.
>
> -Luke 2:7

A manger was a feeding trough for animals – hardly the setting anyone would expect for the birth of the promised King Messiah. Jesus subsequently grew up in Nazareth, a relatively obscure town in Galilee (Luke 2:39). The Gospel of John provides an example of the skepticism associated with this hometown. When Philip announced to Nathanael that they had found the One foretold by Moses and the prophets, Nathanael responded:

> **45** Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith unto him, We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, did write, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. **46** And Nathanael said unto him, **Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?** Philip saith unto him, Come and see.
>
> -John 1:45-46

Nathanael's reaction illustrates how easily Jesus' humble background could lead someone to dismiss His messianic identity. The promised King had come, but He did not possess the outward characteristics people expected of such a figure. He entered the world in humility, grew up in an ordinary Jewish community, and would eventually be rejected by many of His own people – precisely the rejection Isaiah describes in the following verse.

Isaiah 53:3 – The Messiah Is Despised and Rejected

> He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.
>
> -Isaiah 53:3

Isaiah now describes the rejection and humiliation that the Messiah would experience. Notice how the verse begins by saying that He is "despised and rejected of men," but then shifts to "*we* hid as it were our faces from him" and "*we* esteemed him not." Here Isaiah speaks from the perspective of his own people, Israel, identifying the nation as one that would reject the Messiah. This provides yet another indication that the Servant is not collective Israel itself – He is the individual whom the nation rejects. Although He was Israel's long-awaited King, many of His own people would despise Him rather than welcome Him as their promised Messiah. He would be treated with contempt and subjected to tremendous suffering, yet He would willingly endure it for the benefit of those who rejected Him.

This description corresponds with the reception Jesus received during His earthly ministry. Although He attracted many followers and performed extraordinary miracles, He also faced persistent opposition, particularly from the religious authorities who refused to recognize His messianic identity. The Gospel of John summarizes this rejection in a single statement:

> He came unto his own, and his own received him not.
>
> -John 1:11

Isaiah also describes the Servant as "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." The Messiah would experience the pain, sorrow, and suffering associated with life in a fallen world. This was certainly true of Jesus, whose ministry was marked not only by opposition and physical hardship, but also by tremendous compassion for

those who were lost and suffering. For example, Luke records Jesus' emotional response as He approached Jerusalem, knowing that the city would reject Him and ultimately experience judgment:

> **41** And when he was come near, **he beheld the city, and wept over it**,
> **42** Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes.
>
> -Luke 19:41-42

Here we see the sorrow of the very Messiah whom Isaiah had described. Jesus wept over Jerusalem, grieving over the people who failed to recognize the opportunity for peace and redemption that had come to them.

Returning to Isaiah 53:3, we encounter another revealing expression: "we hid as it were our faces from him." This conveys the rejection and contempt directed toward the Servant. It describes people of Israel turning away from Him, as though He were someone too shameful or unpleasant to acknowledge. We might compare it to purposely looking away when encountering someone in public with whom we would be embarrassed to associate. The following statement, "he was despised, and we esteemed him not," reinforces the same idea. The Messiah would be regarded as someone of little worth, unworthy of the honor and recognition He deserved.

The description also anticipates the terrible humiliation Jesus would endure during His trial and crucifixion. Earlier in Isaiah, we encountered another prophecy concerning the faithful Servant, who willingly submits to abuse and humiliation:

> I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting.
>
> -Isaiah 50:6

Notice the contrast. Although others would turn their faces away from the Messiah in contempt, He would not turn His own face away

from the suffering and humiliation He had come to endure. The Gospel accounts describe Jesus being struck, spat upon, and mocked during His trial (Matthew 26:67-68). Even as He hung upon the cross, the ridicule continued:

> **29** And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads, and saying, Ah, thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, **30** Save thyself, and come down from the cross. **31** Likewise also the chief priests mocking said among themselves with the scribes, He saved others; himself he cannot save. **32** Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe. And they that were crucified with him reviled him.
>
> -Mark 15:29-32

Here was the promised King Messiah, publicly humiliated and subjected to the mockery of those who passed by, including the religious leaders of His own people. Rather than recognizing Him as their King, they ridiculed His claims and challenged Him to save Himself from the cross.

Yet Jesus willingly endured this treatment. He surrendered His comfort, reputation, dignity, physical well-being, and ultimately His life for the sake of those He had come to redeem. His rejection was especially remarkable because His suffering was undertaken for the benefit of the very sinners who despised and mistreated Him.

Who would have expected the Hebrew Scriptures to describe Israel's promised King as someone who would be rejected, humiliated, and acquainted with such tremendous grief? Yet this is precisely the picture Isaiah presents, and precisely what the Gospel accounts record concerning Jesus Christ. As we turn to the following verses, Isaiah reveals the reason behind the Messiah's suffering – He would bear the sins and iniquities of others.

Isaiah 53:4-6 – The Messiah's Substitutionary Suffering and Atonement

> **4** Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. **5** But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. **6** All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.
>
> -Isaiah 53:4-6

Having described the Messiah's rejection and humiliation, Isaiah now reveals the reason for His suffering. The Servant would willingly bear the griefs, sorrows, and sins of others. His suffering would not be the result of His own wrongdoing, but would accomplish something for the very people who rejected Him. Isaiah explains this through a series of extraordinary statements, repeatedly contrasting what the Messiah would endure with the sins and failures of those for whom He suffered.

The passage begins by declaring, "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows." Here Isaiah speaks from the perspective of Israel, acknowledging that the Servant would bear the burdens and suffering of His own people. Yet the significance of this prophecy extends beyond Israel, since the Messiah's redemptive work would ultimately benefit all mankind. The griefs and sorrows described here encompass the suffering, sickness, and pain that characterize humanity's fallen condition.

But Isaiah then adds, "yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." In other words, the people would misunderstand the reason for the Messiah's suffering. They would regard Him as someone being punished by God, as though His terrible afflictions were evidence of His own wrongdoing. They would fail to recognize that He was actually suffering on their behalf.

Isaiah corrects this misunderstanding in the following verse: "But

he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities." The emphasis shifts from what the people mistakenly believed about the Servant to the true reason for His suffering. It was not for His own sins, but for theirs. The Messiah would bear the punishment that others deserved.

The Hebrew wording of Isaiah 53:5 adds further significance to this description. The word translated "wounded" in the KJV comes from the Hebrew *halal* (#H2490), which can mean "to bore" or "to pierce."[3] The word translated "bruised" comes from the Hebrew *daka* (#H1792), meaning "to crush" or "to break."[4] Isaiah is describing the Messiah as someone who would be terribly wounded and crushed because of the transgressions and iniquities of others.

These words correspond remarkably with the suffering Jesus endured during His crucifixion. After being scourged by the Romans (Mark 15:15), He was nailed to the cross, where His hands and feet were pierced. Following His death, a Roman soldier also pierced His side with a spear (John 19:34). The wounds associated with His crucifixion provide a powerful correspondence with Isaiah's description of the Suffering Servant.

Yet the central point of the prophecy is not simply the physical suffering the Messiah would endure. Isaiah explains its purpose: "the chastisement of our peace was upon him." The word "chastisement" refers to punishment or discipline, while the reference to "our peace" points to the reconciliation that would be accomplished through His suffering. The Messiah would endure the punishment required to restore our relationship with God. He would suffer in our place so that we could receive the peace and forgiveness that we could never obtain through our own righteousness.

Isaiah then declares, "and with his stripes we are healed." The word "stripes" refers to the wounds inflicted by blows or scourging. This is especially meaningful when we consider that Jesus was scourged before His crucifixion. Yet Isaiah goes beyond describing the wounds themselves. He announces that healing would come to others through the suffering of the Messiah.

Does Isaiah describe physical healing, spiritual healing, or both?

The New Testament provides important insight into this question by applying the prophecy to Jesus in two different contexts.

First, Matthew applies Isaiah 53:4 directly to the physical healings Jesus performed during His earthly ministry:

> **16** When the even was come, they brought unto him many that were possessed with devils: and he cast out the spirits with his word, and healed all that were sick: **17** That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, Himself took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses.
>
> -Matthew 8:16-17

Matthew explicitly identifies these miraculous healings as a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. He quotes the words concerning the Servant bearing the infirmities and sicknesses of others and applies them to Jesus' ministry of physical healing. This demonstrates that the physical dimension of human suffering is genuinely included within the prophecy.

However, the apostle Peter applies the same passage to another aspect of Jesus' redemptive work. In 1 Peter 2:24-25, he connects Isaiah's language about suffering and healing directly to the forgiveness of sins and the spiritual restoration of those who have gone astray:

> **24** Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. **25** For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.
>
> -1 Peter 2:24-25

Peter's application is especially significant because he brings together several elements of Isaiah 53. He explains that Jesus bore our sins in His own body upon the cross, quotes Isaiah's declaration that we are healed through His stripes, and then compares sinners to sheep who have wandered away from their shepherd. In this context,

the healing being described is spiritual – the forgiveness of sins and restoration of our relationship with God.

These two New Testament passages show that both physical and spiritual healing are encompassed within the Messiah's redemptive mission. Matthew emphasizes Jesus' authority over physical sickness and suffering, while Peter emphasizes the spiritual healing accomplished through His sacrificial death. Ultimately, the Messiah's work provides the foundation for the complete restoration of fallen humanity, including the redemption of our bodies.

Returning to Isaiah 53:6, the prophet explains why this suffering and healing were necessary: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way." Sheep are naturally prone to wandering away from their shepherd, often placing themselves in danger because of their own stubbornness and lack of direction. Isaiah uses this familiar picture to describe the spiritual condition of Israel, and by extension, all of humanity.

Just as sheep wander away from their shepherd, humanity has wandered away from God. We have rejected His commandments, pursued our own desires, and chosen our own way instead of His. When Isaiah declares, "All we like sheep have gone astray," he speaks from the perspective of his own people, Israel, and even includes himself among those in need of redemption. However, the sinful condition he describes is not limited to Israel. As Paul explains in Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Although Isaiah speaks collectively on behalf of Israel, the need for redemption that he describes is shared by all mankind.

Isaiah then reveals the purpose behind the Messiah's suffering: "and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." The Servant would suffer not for sins He had committed, but for the sins of others. Yahweh Himself would lay upon the Messiah the iniquities of those He had come to redeem. Here the distinction between the Messiah and those He came to save becomes unmistakable. All of us have gone astray, but the iniquity of us all is laid upon Him. The Servant is the One who bears the sins, while the people are the ones whose sins make His suffering necessary. Once again, this provides powerful

evidence that the Suffering Servant cannot be the nation of Israel collectively, since He is distinguished from those whose iniquities He carries.

This final statement also reveals how God would accomplish the work of redemption. The Father would lay the iniquity of fallen humanity upon Jesus Christ, the Son. Jesus was genuinely human and yet God manifested in the flesh, possessing the sinless perfection necessary to serve as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. As our human Kinsman Redeemer, He could stand in our place and bear the penalty that we deserved. Through the relationship of Father and Son, God accomplished the redemption of mankind.

The apostle Paul expresses this same truth in his second letter to the Corinthians:

> For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.
>
> -2 Corinthians 5:21

Paul's words reinforce exactly what Isaiah had foretold centuries earlier. Jesus, who knew no sin, would bear the sins of others so that they could be reconciled to God and receive His righteousness.

Isaiah 53:4-6 therefore reveals the purpose behind the Messiah's suffering. He would be wounded, crushed, and punished, not because of anything He had done wrong, but because of the sins of those He came to redeem. Through His suffering, forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation with God would become available to fallen humanity. And as Isaiah continues, we discover that the Messiah would submit to this suffering willingly, without defending Himself against those who condemned Him.

Isaiah 53:7 – The Messiah's Silence and Willing Submission

> He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.
>
> -Isaiah 53:7

Having explained why the Messiah would suffer, Isaiah now describes how He would respond to those who oppressed and condemned Him. The prophet compares the Servant to a lamb being led to slaughter and a sheep remaining silent before its shearers, emphasizing His meekness, innocence, and willing submission. Although He had committed no wrongdoing, the Messiah would not attempt to defend Himself against the accusations of those who sought His death. Instead, He would willingly endure His suffering to accomplish His redemptive mission.

The Gospels record that Jesus fulfilled this description during His arrest and trials. Although He was falsely accused by the religious authorities, He repeatedly remained silent rather than defending Himself against their charges. Mark provides a particularly revealing account of Jesus standing before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate:

> **2** And Pilate asked him, Art thou the King of the Jews? And he answering said unto them, Thou sayest it. **3** And the chief priests accused him of many things: but he answered nothing. **4** And Pilate asked him again, saying, Answerest thou nothing? behold how many things they witness against thee. **5** But Jesus yet answered nothing; so that Pilate marvelled.
>
> -Mark 15:2-5

Here we find Jesus doing precisely what Isaiah had foretold. The chief priests were accusing Him of numerous offenses, yet He refused to answer their accusations. His silence was so unexpected that even

Pilate, who was accustomed to questioning prisoners facing execution, was astonished by His behavior.

Matthew also records this same exchange before Pilate, confirming that Jesus remained silent despite the accusations brought against Him (Matthew 27:11-14). The Gospels describe other occasions when Jesus likewise refused to answer His questioners. Luke records that when Jesus was brought before Herod Antipas, the ruler questioned Him at length, but Jesus gave no answer (Luke 23:8-9). John describes a later exchange before Pilate in which Jesus initially remained silent when asked where He came from (John 19:9-11).

Of course, Isaiah's prophecy does not mean that Jesus would never speak during His arrest or trials. The Gospels record several instances in which He did speak, including when He acknowledged His identity as the Messiah before the high priest (Matthew 26:63-64) and explained the nature of His Kingdom to Pilate (John 18:33-37). Isaiah is describing the Servant's willing submission to His suffering, particularly His refusal to defend Himself against the accusations that would lead to His execution. Jesus did not attempt to escape His appointed suffering or resist those who were determined to put Him to death.

This willing submission is especially significant when we remember that Jesus had the power to avoid these trials. He was not a helpless victim whose circumstances were beyond His control. Earlier in His ministry, Jesus had explained the voluntary nature of His coming sacrifice:

> **17** … because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. **18** No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.
>
> -John 10:17-18

Jesus understood that His death was necessary to accomplish the redemption of mankind, and He willingly submitted Himself to that purpose. Although His enemies were responsible for the injustice they

committed against Him, His suffering and death were also part of God's predetermined plan of redemption. The Messiah would submit to the punishment that others deserved, not because He was personally guilty, but because He had come to bear their sins.

The comparison to a lamb also carries significance beyond the Messiah's silence. Throughout the Old Testament, lambs were among the animals offered in sacrifice to God. Their sacrificial role helps explain why Isaiah would describe the Suffering Servant as a lamb being led to slaughter. The Messiah would willingly offer Himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin. This connection is reflected in the words of John the Baptist, who identified Jesus as the Messiah by declaring, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

We also find a direct New Testament identification of Jesus as the fulfillment of this prophecy in Acts 8. There, an Ethiopian official was reading Isaiah 53:7-8 when he encountered Philip, one of the early Christian evangelists. The official asked Philip whom Isaiah was describing, and Luke records the following exchange:

> **34** And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man? **35** Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus.
>
> -Acts 8:34-35

Philip's response provides direct evidence that the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus understood Isaiah's description of the silent, Suffering Servant as a prophecy concerning Him. Beginning with these very verses, Philip explained the good news of the Messiah to the Ethiopian official.

Isaiah 53:7 therefore describes both the Messiah's conduct during His suffering and His willingness to offer Himself for the sins of others. Jesus endured false accusations, humiliation, and condemnation without attempting to resist the death that awaited Him. As Isaiah continues into the following verse, the prophecy reveals the

outcome of this unjust treatment: the Servant would be taken away through judgment and cut off from the land of the living.

Isaiah 53:8 – The Messiah's Unjust Condemnation and Death

> He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.
>
> -Isaiah 53:8

Isaiah now describes the circumstances surrounding the Messiah's condemnation and death. The opening statement, "He was taken from prison and from judgment," portrays the Servant being taken away through oppressive judicial proceedings. Although the KJV uses the word "prison," the underlying Hebrew *otser* (#H6115) can also convey the idea of restraint or oppression, rather than necessarily referring to confinement in a prison cell.[5] The passage describes a man subjected to injustice and ultimately taken away to his death.

This description corresponds with the events surrounding Jesus' arrest and trial. After being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was brought before the Jewish religious authorities, where witnesses presented conflicting testimony against Him (Mark 14:53-59). Despite their inability to establish a consistent case against Him, the council condemned Him as deserving of death (Mark 14:64). He was subsequently delivered to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who repeatedly declared that he could find no fault in Him.

Luke records how Pilate acknowledged Jesus' innocence while ultimately yielding to the demands of the chief priests and the crowd for His execution:

> **22** And he said unto them the third time, Why, what evil hath he done? I have found no cause of death in him: I will therefore chastise him, and let him go. **23** And they were instant with loud voices, requiring

> that he might be crucified. And the voices of them and of the chief priests prevailed. **24** And Pilate gave sentence that it should be as they required.
>
> -Luke 23:22-24

Although the religious authorities had condemned Jesus, Pilate openly acknowledged that He had committed no offense deserving death before ultimately authorizing His execution. Isaiah's description of the Servant being taken away through oppressive judgment finds a remarkable fulfillment in these events.

Isaiah then asks, "and who shall declare his generation?" This expression has been interpreted in more than one way. Some understand it to mean that the Servant would die without descendants to continue His family line, which would correspond with the fact that the Gospels record no biological children of Jesus. Others understand the reference to His "generation" as a description of His contemporaries, asking who among them showed concern for His suffering and death. Under this interpretation, Isaiah is describing the indifference of those who witnessed the injustice being committed against the Servant.[6] Both interpretations find a correspondence in the life and death of Jesus.

The next statement removes any uncertainty about the outcome of the Servant's suffering: "for he was cut off out of the land of the living." Here Isaiah explicitly describes the Servant's death. The expression "cut off out of the land of the living" indicates that His earthly life would be brought to an end. Isaiah had previously described the Messiah as wounded, bruised, and led like a lamb to slaughter, but now he directly declares that the Servant would die.

This was fulfilled in the crucifixion of Jesus. The Gospel accounts describe how He was nailed to the cross, suffered under Roman execution, and ultimately gave up His life. John records His final declaration, "It is finished," immediately before His death (John 19:30). The Messiah had come to suffer and die, accomplishing the sacrifice that Isaiah had foretold.

The final statement in verse 8 returns to the reason for this suffer-

ing: "for the transgression of my people was he stricken." Isaiah again distinguishes the Servant from Israel, whose transgressions make His suffering necessary. This reinforces the fact that the Servant cannot be identified with the nation collectively, since He suffers for Israel's sins rather than His own.

Although Israel is the immediate subject of this statement, the atoning work of the Messiah would ultimately extend beyond the Jewish nation. As we have already established, the New Testament explains that Jesus bore the sins of mankind, making reconciliation with God available to all who place their faith in Him.

We should also recall that Acts 8:33 quotes this very passage of Isaiah, including the declaration, "for his life is taken from the earth." As we discussed in the preceding verse, an Ethiopian official was reading Isaiah 53:7-8 when he encountered Philip. The official asked Philip whether Isaiah was speaking about himself or someone else. Philip then "began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus" (Acts 8:35). In other words, Philip directly identified Jesus as the Suffering Servant whose life would be taken, demonstrating that the earliest Jewish followers of Christ understood this prophecy as describing the Messiah's suffering and death.

Isaiah 53:8 therefore takes the prophecy beyond the Messiah's humiliation and suffering to His unjust condemnation and death. Yet even His execution would not bring an end to the prophetic details surrounding Him. In the following verse, Isaiah describes the circumstances of the Servant's burial, providing another remarkable correspondence with the Gospel accounts.

Isaiah 53:9 – The Messiah's Burial and Innocence

> And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.
>
> -Isaiah 53:9

Having foretold the Messiah's suffering and death, Isaiah now describes the circumstances surrounding His burial, associating the Servant with both the wicked and the rich.

The first statement, "And he made his grave with the wicked," raises an interpretive question. Although Luke records that Jesus was crucified alongside two condemned criminals (Luke 23:32-33), the Gospels do not describe Him being buried among them. One recognized Christian interpretation understands Isaiah as contrasting the dishonorable burial intended for the Servant with the burial He ultimately received.[7] Under this interpretation, the prophecy describes the disgraceful fate assigned to a condemned man, followed by an unexpected change in the circumstances of His burial.

That contrast corresponds with the events following Jesus' crucifixion. Despite being condemned and executed as a criminal, Jesus received an honorable burial through the intervention of Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy Jewish man who had become His disciple. Matthew records what happened:

> **57** When the even was come, there came a rich man of Arimathaea, named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus' disciple: **58** He went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be delivered. **59** And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, **60** And laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock: and he rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed.
>
> -Matthew 27:57-60

Regardless of the precise interpretation of Isaiah's wording, it is significant that he associates the Servant's death and burial with both the wicked and the rich – the very same two categories that appear in the Gospel accounts surrounding Jesus' death and burial.

Isaiah then concludes the verse with an explanation of the Servant's innocence: "because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth." Despite being condemned and put to death, the Messiah would have committed no wrongdoing to justify His

punishment. He would be innocent in both His actions and His words, having neither committed acts of wickedness nor practiced deceit.

This description corresponds with the sinless character of Jesus throughout His earthly ministry. Although His enemies repeatedly sought grounds to accuse and condemn Him, He had committed no sin. Even one of the criminals crucified beside Him acknowledged His innocence, declaring, "but this man hath done nothing amiss" (Luke 23:41).

The apostle Peter also directly applies Isaiah's description of the innocent Servant to Jesus, repeating the prophecy's declaration that He was without sin or deceit:

> Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth:
>
> -1 Peter 2:22

This again reinforces the contrast between the Messiah and the nation of Israel. In the very first chapter of his book, Isaiah condemns Israel as "a sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity" (Isaiah 1:4). God declares that their "hands are full of blood" (Isaiah 1:15), and describes Jerusalem as a city where righteousness once dwelt, "but now murderers" (Isaiah 1:21). Yet in Isaiah 53:9, the Servant is expressly declared to have "done no violence," with no deceit in His mouth. How could Isaiah condemn Israel for its bloodshed and wickedness, then identify that same nation as the innocent Servant who had committed no violence or deceit? This striking contrast further supports the conclusion that Isaiah 53 describes a distinct, righteous individual – the Messiah – rather than the collective nation of Israel.

Having described the Messiah's death and burial, Isaiah now turns to what God would accomplish through His sacrifice, revealing that His death would not be the end of His mission.

Isaiah 53:10-11 – The Messiah's Sacrifice, Resurrection, and Justification

> **10** Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. **11** He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.
>
> -Isaiah 53:10-11

After describing the Messiah's suffering, death, and burial, Isaiah now reveals that His sacrifice was part of God's predetermined plan of redemption. The opening statement, "Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief," explains that the suffering of the Messiah would occur according to God's will and accomplish His divine purpose.

This does not mean that God delighted in the pain and suffering inflicted upon His innocent Son. Rather, it was the salvation accomplished through His sacrifice that pleased the Father. The apostle Paul explains how God was accomplishing this work of reconciliation through Jesus Christ:

> To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.
>
> -2 Corinthians 5:19

Isaiah reinforces this purpose with the words, "when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin." The Messiah's death would constitute a sacrifice for the sins of others, fulfilling the ultimate purpose anticipated in the sacrificial offerings prescribed under the Law of Moses. Whereas the unblemished lambs sacrificed under the Law provided temporary atonement for Israel, Jesus, the sinless Lamb of

God, offered Himself as the final, once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the whole world (Hebrews 10:1-14; John 1:29).

Isaiah then makes an incredible declaration concerning what would happen after the Messiah offered His life for sin: "he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand." Having already declared that the Servant would be "cut off out of the land of the living" (Isaiah 53:8), the prophet now describes Him as living to see His descendants and continuing to accomplish God's purposes.

Isaiah's declaration that the Servant would "prolong his days" points directly to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Although He would die as an offering for sin, He would rise again, having conquered death, and continue His work. The apostle Peter proclaimed this very truth when he declared that God had raised Jesus from the dead:

> Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.
>
> -Acts 2:24

Having risen from the dead, Jesus would also fulfill Isaiah's declaration that the Servant would "see his seed." This can be understood as a reference to His spiritual descendants – those who would come to faith in Him and receive the salvation accomplished through His sacrifice. Although Jesus had no biological children, He would become the head of a vast spiritual family, including the Church. Paul describes this relationship in Romans 8:29, identifying Jesus as "the firstborn among many brethren." Through His resurrection, Christ lives to see this spiritual family continue to grow.

The statement that "the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand" further emphasizes the success of the Messiah's mission. His suffering would accomplish its intended purpose, and His resurrection would ensure the continuation of His work. What appeared to be a humiliating defeat at the cross would ultimately result in the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption.

Isaiah continues, "He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall

be satisfied." The Messiah would look upon the results of His suffering and find satisfaction in what He had accomplished. This brings to mind the joy Jesus anticipated through His sacrifice, which included the redemption of those who would become His beloved bride. The New Testament identifies the Church in this relationship with Christ (Ephesians 5:25-32; 2 Corinthians 11:2). The writer of Hebrews describes this anticipated joy:

> Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; **who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame**, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.
>
> -Hebrews 12:2

The word "despising" conveys that Jesus regarded the shame of the cross as insignificant compared with the joy that awaited Him – the satisfaction of seeing what His suffering would accomplish, just as Isaiah had foretold.

Isaiah then identifies a central reason for this satisfaction: "by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities." By bearing the sins of others, the righteous Servant would bring justification to those who come to know and trust in Him, granting them a righteousness they could never obtain through their own efforts. Paul likewise contrasts the condemnation brought upon humanity through Adam with the justification made available through Jesus Christ:

> Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.
>
> -Romans 5:18

Isaiah concludes the chapter by describing the Messiah's ultimate victory and the reward that would follow His suffering.

Isaiah 53:12 – The Messiah's Victory and Intercession

> Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.
>
> -Isaiah 53:12

Isaiah concludes his prophecy with the promise of the Messiah's ultimate victory and exaltation. The imagery of dividing the spoils of battle portrays a victorious conqueror receiving the rewards of His triumph. Having willingly suffered and given His life for sinners, the Messiah would ultimately be exalted. Paul describes this victory in his letter to the Philippians:

> **9** Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: **10** That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; **11** And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
>
> -Philippians 2:9-11

Isaiah also says that the Messiah would "divide the spoil with the strong." This suggests that others would share in the rewards of His victory. The New Testament reveals that those who belong to Christ will share in His inheritance and glory, as Paul explains:

> And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.
>
> -Romans 8:17

Isaiah then explains the basis for the Servant's victory: "because he hath poured out his soul unto death." His exaltation would follow His willing sacrifice. The prophecy further declares that He was "num-

bered with the transgressors," a statement that Jesus Himself explicitly applied to His approaching death:

> For I say unto you, that this that is written must yet be accomplished in me, And he was reckoned among the transgressors: for the things concerning me have an end.
>
> -Luke 22:37

As Isaiah foretold, Jesus was literally numbered among the transgressors when He was crucified between two condemned criminals (Luke 23:32-33), despite having committed no wrongdoing Himself.

Isaiah's final words also declare that the Messiah "bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." Luke records a direct example of this intercession as Jesus prayed for those responsible for His crucifixion:

> Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.
>
> -Luke 23:34a

Although this prayer specifically concerned those involved in His execution, the Messiah's sacrifice provides forgiveness for all who will receive it. As Paul reminds us, "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The risen Christ also continues to make intercession for those who belong to Him (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25).

Isaiah 53 presents Jesus Christ as the promised Suffering Servant whose sacrifice would bring salvation not only to Israel but to the world. The extraordinary precision of these prophetic fulfillments – from His rejection and suffering to His death, burial, and ultimate exaltation – provides a powerful testimony that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah. The Bible closes with an invitation for all who will come to Him and receive this free gift:

> And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.

-Revelation 22:17b

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CHAPTER 6

ANSWERING JEWISH OBJECTIONS

After examining the remarkable fulfillment of Isaiah 53 in Jesus Christ, we now turn to the principal objections raised against the messianic interpretation. Some concern the identity of the Servant, while others challenge whether Jesus fulfilled particular details of the prophecy. We will examine these objections in light of the biblical text and the historical evidence.

The Historical Shift in Jewish Interpretation of Isaiah 53

Christianity did not begin as a Gentile religion that later attempted to impose its beliefs upon the Hebrew Scriptures. It began within Judaism itself. Jesus Christ was Jewish, His apostles were Jewish, and the earliest community of believers in Jerusalem consisted of Jews who recognized Him as their promised Messiah. In fact, the movement that would eventually become known as Christianity initially emerged as a Jewish sect, with its earliest followers continuing to worship and participate in Jewish religious life. The Book of Acts records thousands of Jews accepting Jesus as Messiah (Acts 2:41;

21:20), and it was only later, in Antioch, that His followers were first called Christians (Acts 11:26).

These earliest Jewish believers understood the suffering and death of Jesus through the prophecies and expectations already present within their own Scriptures. As we demonstrated in Chapter 4, the messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 was deeply rooted in Jewish tradition and was by no means an invention of Christianity. The expectation that God would accomplish redemption through suffering and sacrifice also reaches much further back into the Hebrew Scriptures.

Consider the remarkable typological account of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22, commonly known in Jewish tradition as the *Akedah*, or the Binding of Isaac. God commanded Abraham to offer his beloved son in the land of Moriah (Genesis 22:2). As they approached the place of sacrifice, Isaac asked his father where the lamb was. Abraham replied, "My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:8). God ultimately spared Isaac and provided a ram to be sacrificed in his place (Genesis 22:13). Yet this extraordinary event also prophetically foreshadowed a far greater sacrifice – the day when God would provide the ultimate sacrificial Lamb in that very same place.

Even the geographical connection is remarkable. Centuries later, Solomon would build the Temple on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 3:1) – the very city where God would ultimately offer His own beloved Son as the perfect sacrifice for sin. Moses also preserves the name Abraham gave that place, Jehovahjireh, meaning "The Lord will provide," together with the continuing declaration, "In the mount of the Lord *it shall be seen*" (Genesis 22:14). The prophetic significance of this declaration finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, whom John the Baptist identified with the words, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

This expectation of a future and ultimate sacrifice became even more significant when God established the sacrificial system through Moses, making the principle of substitutionary atonement foundational to Israel's worship. From the Passover lamb, whose blood

provided deliverance from judgment (Exodus 12:3-13), to the annual Day of Atonement, when sacrifices were offered for the sins of the nation (Leviticus 16), the entire system emphasized the seriousness of sin, the necessity of blood atonement, and the need for a sacrifice on behalf of the guilty (Leviticus 17:11). Yet these sacrifices had to be repeated continually, year after year, demonstrating that they could never provide the ultimate and permanent removal of sin. As the New Testament later explains, "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). The entire Mosaic sacrificial system therefore served as a divinely ordained preparation for something far greater – the coming of the perfect messianic sacrificial Lamb who would accomplish once and for all what the blood of animals could never ultimately achieve (Hebrews 9:11-14; 10:10-14).

Centuries after Moses, David, Israel's anointed king, provided another extraordinary prophetic portrait of the Messiah's suffering in Psalm 22. At a certain point in this prophecy, David's words clearly begin to extend beyond his own personal experiences, prophetically foreshadowing the suffering of the promised Messiah – the greater Son of David. The expectation that the Messiah would descend from David was deeply established in Jewish Scripture (2 Samuel 7:12-16; Isaiah 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5-6).

In Psalm 22, he describes a righteous individual who is mocked and ridiculed, whose hands and feet are pierced, and whose garments are divided by casting lots (Psalm 22:7-8, 16-18). These extraordinary details correspond remarkably with the Gospel accounts of Jesus' crucifixion (Matthew 27:35, 39-43; John 19:23-24). Yet just as in Isaiah 53, the suffering described in Psalm 22 ultimately gives way to vindication and triumph, culminating in the nations of the world turning to the Lord (Psalm 22:22-31).

The prophet Daniel later provided an even more explicit prediction of the Messiah's death. After identifying the coming figure as "Messiah the Prince" (Daniel 9:25), Daniel declares that the Messiah would be "cut off, but not for himself" (Daniel 9:26). This extraordinary prophecy foretells that the Messiah would be put to death, with the

wording "not for himself" pointing to the sacrificial nature of His death on behalf of others. Even more remarkably, Daniel places the Messiah's death before the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem and its sanctuary. Jesus Christ was crucified in 33 AD, approximately four decades before the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Second Temple in 70 AD – precisely fitting the historical sequence foretold by Daniel. Here again, centuries before the coming of Jesus, the Hebrew Scriptures anticipated the suffering and death of Israel's promised Messiah, corresponding with the substitutionary sacrifice described in Isaiah 53.

Against this background, the earliest Jewish followers of Jesus recognized in His suffering and death the fulfillment of God's ancient redemptive purposes. Isaiah had described a Servant who would be led like a lamb to the slaughter, bear the iniquities of others, and offer His life as a sacrifice for sin (Isaiah 53:7, 10-11). These were the Scriptures that the apostles used to proclaim Jesus as Messiah. Peter explicitly declared that God had fulfilled what He had foretold through His prophets concerning the suffering of Christ (Acts 3:18). Their understanding of Jesus did not emerge from an unfamiliar Gentile religious tradition, but from the Scriptures and messianic expectations of their own people.

But as the message of Jesus Christ spread throughout the Jewish world and increasingly among the Gentiles, a profound controversy developed over His messianic identity. The Christians appealed to Isaiah 53 as powerful prophetic evidence that Jesus was the promised Messiah, while Jewish opponents began to reject that identification. Eventually, we find Jewish interpreters arguing that the Suffering Servant represented the collective nation of Israel rather than an individual Messiah. How did this alternative interpretation develop, and how did it eventually become the prevailing understanding within mainstream Judaism? To answer these questions, we must trace the historical evidence, beginning with some of the earliest recorded disputes between Jews and Christians over Isaiah's remarkable prophecy.

One of the earliest surviving records of this controversy comes

from the third-century Christian theologian Origen, who described a debate with Jewish scholars over Isaiah's Suffering Servant prophecy. In his work *Against Celsus*, Origen recalled quoting the prophecy to his Jewish opponents, only to be told that its predictions referred to "the whole people, regarded as one individual." According to this explanation, instead of being an individual messianic Savior, the Servant represented the Jewish nation suffering in exile and dispersion among the Gentiles. Origen challenged this interpretation by appealing to the Servant's suffering on behalf of others, particularly the statements that He bore their sins and was wounded for their transgressions.[1]

This account is especially revealing because it demonstrates that the collective-Israel interpretation was already being advanced during Jewish-Christian disputes in the third century AD. The controversy centered on whether Isaiah 53 was actually prophesying the suffering and death of Jesus as the promised Messiah. Interpreting the Servant as the collective nation provided an alternative explanation without acknowledging its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

This alternative explanation existed alongside a long-established Jewish tradition that recognized the Messiah in Isaiah 53. As we demonstrated extensively in Chapter 4, Targum Jonathan, the Babylonian Talmud, and writings in the Midrash all explicitly identify the Suffering Servant as the Messiah. Other prominent Jewish authorities likewise understood the prophecy messianically. The collective-Israel interpretation was therefore competing with a longstanding messianic understanding already deeply rooted within Judaism itself.

Over the following centuries, this interpretation gained greater prominence, particularly through influential medieval Jewish commentators. Among the most important was Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105 AD), commonly known as Rashi, whose biblical commentaries became enormously influential within Judaism. In his interpretation of Isaiah 52:13, Rashi explicitly identified the Servant as Jacob, referring to the righteous among the Jewish people.[2] Rather than understanding the passage as a prophecy concerning the suffering and exaltation of an individual Messiah, Rashi applied its descriptions to the humiliation of Israel among the nations and its

eventual restoration. Other prominent Jewish commentators, including Abraham ibn Ezra and David Kimhi, also advanced interpretations identifying the Servant with Israel.[3] Over time, this understanding became increasingly influential and eventually developed into the prevailing interpretation within mainstream Judaism.

However, the rise of this alternative interpretation did not bring an end to the traditional messianic understanding. Even centuries after Rashi, prominent Jewish scholars continued to identify the Servant of Isaiah 53 with the Messiah. One especially revealing example that we have not yet mentioned comes from the medieval Jewish commentator Rabbi Moshe Kohen ibn Crispin, who directly challenged the interpretation that the passage referred to Israel collectively. He argued that such an explanation departed from the natural meaning of the text and expressly declared his intention to interpret the prophecy in accordance with the teaching of the rabbis concerning the King Messiah.[4]

This was no isolated example. As we documented in Chapter 4, Maimonides, writing in the twelfth century, applied portions of Isaiah's Servant prophecy to the coming Messiah. Centuries later, Rabbi Moshe Alshich, writing in the sixteenth century, likewise insisted that the prophecy concerned the King Messiah, explicitly appealing to earlier rabbinic tradition. Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas also interpreted the Servant's suffering in connection with the Messiah bearing the iniquities of others.

These prominent examples demonstrate that the messianic interpretation persisted for many centuries after Christianity had emerged and even after the collective-Israel interpretation had gained considerable influence. The historical evidence therefore raises an important question: did the collective-Israel interpretation gain prominence because it was the natural reading of Isaiah 53, or because centuries of controversy with Christians made it an appealing way to deny that the prophecy foretold the suffering and death of Jesus as the Messiah?

The Omission of Isaiah 53 from the *Haftarah* Readings

Another revealing feature of the controversy surrounding Isaiah 53 involves the Jewish practice of public Scripture reading. In synagogues, selected passages from the Prophets are read following the weekly Torah portions. The weekly Torah portion is called the *Parsha*, and its accompanying prophetic reading is called the *Haftarah*.

The Torah, comprising the five books of Moses from Genesis through Deuteronomy, is divided into portions that are read publicly in synagogues throughout the year. Each Sabbath, the Torah reading is followed by a corresponding passage from the Prophets, usually selected because of its relationship to that week's Torah portion or its significance within the Jewish calendar. Unlike the Torah, however, the prophetic books are not read in their entirety. Instead, only certain passages are included in the *Haftarah* readings. This is an ancient Jewish practice, dating back at least to the first century AD. In fact, the New Testament itself records Jesus reading from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21), while the Book of Acts describes a synagogue service in which the reading of "the law and the prophets" preceded Paul's address to the congregation (Acts 13:15). Although the specific selections became standardized over time, the practice of reading from the Prophets alongside the Torah was already established in the days of Jesus and the apostles.[5]

This brings us to a particularly suspicious omission within the seven *Haftarot of Consolation*, a series of readings drawn from the book of Isaiah. Two of these readings accompany consecutive weekly Torah portions known as *Shoftim* and *Ki Teitzei*. The *Haftarah* associated with *Shoftim* ends at Isaiah 52:12, while the *Haftarah* associated with *Ki Teitzei* the following week begins at Isaiah 54:1. Between these two readings lies the entire Suffering Servant prophecy of Isaiah 52:13-53:12.[6] This striking omission has led some Christians to refer to Isaiah 53 as the "forbidden chapter."

But why is this particular passage omitted? Isaiah 53 is central to the prophecy's message of suffering, redemption, and ultimate vindication. As we've shown, it begins with the exaltation of the Servant

(Isaiah 52:13), describes His suffering and sacrifice for the sins of others, and concludes with His ultimate triumph (Isaiah 53:10-12). These themes are closely connected with the surrounding passages of consolation and restoration. Why, then, does the customary reading cycle include the passages immediately before and after this extraordinary prophecy while leaving out the prophecy itself?

Interestingly, the possibility that this omission was deliberate has also been acknowledged by Jewish scholars. In *A Rabbinic Anthology*, published in 1938, Jewish scholar Herbert Loewe specifically connected the exclusion of Isaiah 53 from the *Haftarah* readings with the Christian interpretation of the chapter. He described the omission as "deliberate and striking."[7]

Further evidence comes from Jewish scholar Hananel Mack, who examined this question in a 2005 article published in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, entitled "What Happened to Jesus' Haftarah?" Mack identified a broader pattern in which passages prominently associated with Jesus in the New Testament were absent from the customary synagogue readings. His examples included Isaiah 7:14, Isaiah 61:1-2, and the Suffering Servant prophecy beginning at Isaiah 52:13, along with several other passages. Mack concluded that the pattern was not coincidental but reflected a conscious tendency to avoid passages that had become especially important to Christian beliefs.[8]

Taken together, the testimony of Loewe and Mack makes the omission of Isaiah 53 especially significant. The very passage that had become central to the Jewish-Christian controversy over Jesus' messianic identity was excluded from these customary readings, even while the surrounding passages were retained. Their observations give us substantial reason to believe that this omission was no mere coincidence, but was influenced by the longstanding controversy over the Suffering Servant and His identification with Jesus Christ.

The Suffering Servant and the Conquering King

One of the most common Jewish objections to Jesus' messianic identity is that He did not fulfill all the prophecies concerning the Messiah.

According to this argument, the Messiah must accomplish certain things during His earthly ministry, and because Jesus did not accomplish them, He cannot be the promised Messiah.

For example, in his book *26 Reasons Why Jews Don't Believe in Jesus*, Orthodox Jewish author Asher Norman identifies six principal requirements for the Messiah: He must descend from King David through Solomon, be anointed King of Israel, regather the Jewish people to their homeland, rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, establish worldwide peace, and bring the knowledge of God to the entire world. Norman argues that Jesus failed to satisfy these requirements and therefore cannot be the Messiah.[9]

These expectations are not without biblical foundation. The Hebrew prophets repeatedly describe a glorious future in which the Messiah reigns from Jerusalem, Israel is restored, the nations submit to God's authority, and warfare comes to an end (Isaiah 2:1-4; 11:1-9; Ezekiel 37:21-28; Zechariah 14:9). The prophets also describe a future Temple and the restoration of worship in Jerusalem (Ezekiel 40-48). Christians who take these prophecies literally also recognize that these promises remain to be fulfilled. We believe that Jesus Christ will accomplish them when He returns to establish His promised earthly Kingdom.

The difficulty with the objection is that these are not the only messianic prophecies found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Alongside the descriptions of a glorious and victorious King, we find another remarkable prophetic portrait – that of a Messiah who suffers rejection, humiliation, and death. As we've noted throughout this study, Isaiah 53 describes the Servant bearing the iniquities of others and offering His life as a sacrifice for sin. Psalm 22 also portrays the suffering of the righteous Davidic figure, including details that correspond to Jesus' crucifixion. Daniel 9:26 declares that the Messiah would be "cut off," while Zechariah 12:10 describes Israel mourning over One whom they have pierced.

These two groups of prophecies present the Messiah in dramatically different circumstances. In one, He suffers and dies; in the other, He triumphs over His enemies and reigns in glory. Both portraits are

found in the Hebrew Scriptures, and both must be accounted for. The question is how these seemingly contrasting descriptions are to be reconciled.

Jewish tradition itself preserves an expectation involving two distinct messianic figures. One is known as Messiah ben Joseph, a suffering Messiah who is slain, while the other is Messiah ben David, the victorious King who brings about Israel's ultimate redemption. The Babylonian Talmud, in Tractate Sukkah 52a, explicitly discusses the death of Messiah ben Joseph in connection with Zechariah 12:10 and distinguishes him from Messiah ben David.[10] This demonstrates that Jewish interpreters themselves recognized the possibility of a Messiah who would suffer and die before the establishment of the glorious Messianic Kingdom.

Christianity resolves these two prophetic portraits differently. Rather than proposing two separate Messiahs, we recognize one Messiah who comes twice, accomplishing two distinct missions. At His First Coming, Jesus came as the Suffering Servant to provide redemption from sin through His sacrificial death. At His Second Coming, He will return as the Conquering King to defeat His enemies, restore Israel, establish His righteous earthly Kingdom, and fulfill the remaining promises of the prophets.

Jesus Himself explained this distinction after His resurrection. Speaking to two of His disciples on the road to Emmaus, He asked, "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:26). Notice the order: first the suffering, then the glory. Peter likewise declared that God had fulfilled the prophetic predictions concerning Christ's suffering and then spoke of His future return and the coming "times of restitution of all things" (Acts 3:18-21). The New Testament therefore presents the suffering and reigning Messiah as the same individual, with His redemptive work preceding His glorious Kingdom.

This brings us to the fundamental problem with the objection. It assumes that the Messiah must fulfill every messianic prophecy during a single appearance, even though the Hebrew Scriptures themselves contain these two contrasting prophetic portraits. But where do

the Scriptures require that the Messiah accomplish both His suffering and His glorious reign at the same time? If Jesus had instead come as the Conquering King and immediately established His Kingdom, what would have become of the prophecies requiring the Messiah to suffer, be rejected, and die for the sins of others?

The fact that Jesus did not establish the promised earthly Kingdom at His First Coming does not invalidate His messianic identity. His First Coming fulfilled the prophecies concerning the suffering and sacrificial death of the Messiah, while His Second Coming will fulfill those concerning His victorious reign. The remarkable fulfillment of the Suffering Servant prophecies provides the foundation for our confidence that He will also accomplish everything the prophets foretold concerning His future Kingdom.

An Analysis of Twelve Additional Jewish Objections

Since we have addressed the broader Jewish objections concerning Jesus' messianic identity throughout this study, we can now examine several additional arguments directed against His fulfillment of Isaiah 53. These objections focus on specific words and phrases within the prophecy, claiming that certain details are inconsistent with what the New Testament records about Jesus.[11]

Three Objections Concerning the Servant's Suffering and Rejection

Objection #1: Jesus was never chronically ill.

The first objection concerns Isaiah 53:3, where the Servant is described as "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." The argument is that the underlying Hebrew expression, *ish makovot*, refers to someone who is habitually or chronically ill. Since the New Testament never records Jesus suffering from a chronic illness, some argue that He could not be the individual Isaiah was describing.

However, the Hebrew expression can describe someone acquainted

with pain and suffering without requiring a chronic medical condition.[12] The context of Isaiah 53 concerns the Servant's rejection, humiliation, and extraordinary suffering, culminating in His death. The Gospel accounts describe Jesus experiencing precisely such suffering, particularly during the events surrounding His arrest, scourging, and crucifixion (Matthew 27:26-44; Mark 15:15-32). There is no requirement in Isaiah's wording that the Servant must have suffered from a chronic illness.

Objection #2: Jesus never suffered from leprosy.

A related objection concerns Isaiah 53:4, where the Servant is described as "stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." The Hebrew word translated "stricken" also appears in 2 Kings 15:5, where God strikes King Azariah, also known as Uzziah, with leprosy. On this basis, some argue that Isaiah must be describing a leper. Since the Gospels never portray Jesus as suffering from leprosy, they conclude that He could not have fulfilled the prophecy.

The problem is that the underlying Hebrew terminology is not restricted to leprosy. It can describe someone who has been struck or afflicted without identifying any particular disease.[13] In fact, Isaiah's statement concerns how the observers regarded the Servant's suffering: "yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted." The point is that those witnessing His suffering mistakenly regarded Him as someone being punished by God, whereas the surrounding verses explain that He was actually suffering for the sins of others. Nothing in the passage requires the Servant to have contracted leprosy.

Objection #3: Jesus was admired rather than despised and rejected.

Another objection argues that Isaiah 53:2-3 describes someone who would be unattractive, unwanted, and rejected, whereas the Gospels frequently portray Jesus attracting large crowds and receiving considerable admiration (Matthew 4:24-25; Luke 4:14-15).

But this argument overlooks the distinction between popularity among certain groups and rejection by others. Jesus attracted large crowds because of His teachings and miracles, yet He also experienced intense opposition, particularly from religious authorities who eventually sought His execution. Even in Luke 4, where Jesus initially receives widespread attention, the people in His hometown subsequently become so enraged by His teaching that they attempt to throw Him from a cliff (Luke 4:28-29). The crowds who welcomed Him did not prevent His eventual rejection, humiliation, and crucifixion. Isaiah never declared that every individual would reject the Servant at every moment of His life. His prophecy describes the rejection and suffering that would ultimately characterize the Servant's experience.

Four Objections Concerning Jesus' Character and Conduct

Objection #4: Jesus was not humble.

Isaiah 53:7 portrays the Servant as one who submits to His suffering without resistance, but some critics argue that Jesus frequently spoke in ways that demonstrated arrogance rather than humility. They point especially to His extraordinary claims about His own identity and authority, including His declarations, "He that believeth on me hath everlasting life" (John 6:47) and "he that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9).

However, making extraordinary claims is not necessarily evidence of arrogance if those claims are true. If Jesus is the divine Messiah, then His statements concerning His identity must be considered in that context. His humility is demonstrated by His willingness to take the position of a servant, wash His disciples' feet, endure humiliation, and voluntarily submit to death for the redemption of others (John 13:4-15; Philippians 2:5-8). Jesus Himself declared that He came "not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). His willingness to suffer for others provides compelling testimony to the humility Isaiah describes.

Objection #5: Jesus spoke during His trial instead of remaining silent.

Isaiah 53:7 declares that the Servant would be like a lamb brought to slaughter and that "he opened not his mouth." Some object that Jesus spoke on several occasions during His arrest and trial, answering questions and responding to His accusers. They argue that this contradicts Isaiah's description of the silent Servant.

Yet Isaiah is describing the Servant's submission to His suffering, not imposing a requirement that He never utter a word throughout the proceedings. The Gospels actually record several remarkable occasions when Jesus remained silent before His accusers. Matthew 27:12-14 states that He gave no answer to the accusations brought against Him, astonishing Pontius Pilate. Luke 23:9 likewise records that Jesus refused to answer Herod despite his repeated questioning. These accounts correspond with Isaiah's portrayal of an innocent Servant who submits to unjust treatment rather than attempting to escape His appointed suffering.

Objection #6: Jesus committed acts of violence.

Some critics argue that Jesus violated Isaiah 53:9, which declares that the Servant had "done no violence." They cite His cleansing of the Temple, particularly the account in John 2:15, where Jesus makes a whip from small cords and drives out those engaged in commerce within the Temple courts. They also appeal to statements such as Matthew 10:34, where Jesus declares that He came not to send peace, "but a sword."

Neither example establishes that Jesus committed sinful violence. Although John describes Jesus making a whip and driving out the merchants and animals, the passage never states that He injured anyone. His actions were directed against the corruption of worship within His Father's house (John 2:16). Likewise, Jesus' statement concerning the sword in Matthew 10:34 refers to the divisions that allegiance to Him would produce, as the following verses explain, rather than commanding His followers to engage in physical

violence. Isaiah's declaration concerns the Servant's innocence of wrongdoing, and the Gospel accounts provide no evidence that Jesus committed the kind of wickedness that would have justified His execution.

Objection #7: Jesus deceived His disciples concerning His return.

Another objection attempts to challenge Isaiah's declaration that the Servant had no deceit in His mouth. Critics point to Matthew 16:28, where Jesus tells His disciples that some standing before Him would not die until they had seen "the Son of man coming in his kingdom." They argue that Jesus predicted His Second Coming within the lifetime of His disciples and that this prediction failed.

However, this interpretation overlooks what immediately follows in the Gospel narrative. Just six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John onto a mountain, where He is transfigured before them, revealing His extraordinary glory (Matthew 17:1-3). The same sequence appears in Mark 9:1-8 and Luke 9:27-36. The Transfiguration provides a remarkable fulfillment of Jesus' promise that some of His disciples would witness a manifestation of His royal glory before their deaths.[14] Peter later describes this very event as an eyewitness revelation of Christ's majesty in connection with His "power and coming" (2 Peter 1:16-18). The claim that Jesus made a failed prediction therefore rests upon an interpretation that disregards the immediate biblical context.

Two Objections Concerning the Servant's Death and Burial

Objections #8 and #9: Jesus was not buried with the wicked and no rich person died alongside Jesus.

As we examined in Chapter 5, these two objections concern Isaiah 53:9, which declares that the Servant would make His grave "with the wicked, and with the rich in his death." Critics argue that although Jesus was crucified alongside criminals, He was not buried with them.

They also argue that no wealthy individual died alongside Jesus, even though the Gospels describe Him being buried in a rich man's tomb.

However, these objections overlook the remarkable circumstances surrounding Jesus' death and burial. Jesus was condemned as a criminal and crucified between two transgressors (Luke 23:32-33). Given the disgraceful circumstances of His execution, He would ordinarily have been destined for a dishonorable burial alongside other condemned criminals. But Joseph of Arimathea, whom Matthew explicitly identifies as a rich man, intervened and requested Jesus' body from Pilate. He then buried Jesus in his own new tomb (Matthew 27:57-60).

In other words, Jesus was destined for a grave associated with the wicked, but the intervention of a wealthy man resulted in His burial in a rich man's tomb. This sequence of events corresponds remarkably with both elements of Isaiah 53:9. The prophecy does not require a wealthy individual to have died alongside the Servant. Rather, it associates His death and burial with both the wicked and the rich – precisely the circumstances we find surrounding the death and burial of Jesus Christ.

Three Objections Concerning the Servant's Offspring and Prolonged Days

Objection #10: Jesus never had children.

Isaiah 53:10 declares that after the Servant's life becomes an offering for sin, "he shall see his seed." Some object that Jesus never married or fathered children, and therefore could not have fulfilled this statement.

However, the Hebrew concept of offspring or descendants does not require that Isaiah be describing biological children.[15] The immediate context concerns the results of the Servant's sacrificial death, and verse 11 explains that through His suffering, the righteous Servant would "justify many." The New Testament states that His offspring are those who receive spiritual life through His redemptive work. John

1:12-13 describes those who believe in Jesus as becoming children of God, born not through ordinary human descent but through God Himself. The Messiah's spiritual descendants are therefore the multitudes brought into a saving relationship with God through His sacrifice.

Objection #11: Jesus died young instead of having His days prolonged.

The same verse declares that the Servant "shall prolong his days." Critics argue that Jesus died while still a relatively young man, making it impossible to identify Him with someone whose life would supposedly be extended.

But this objection overlooks the extraordinary sequence Isaiah presents. The Servant first offers His life as a sacrifice for sin, yet afterward He sees the results of His suffering and continues to accomplish God's purposes. As we explained in Chapter 5, this points to the Messiah's resurrection. Jesus was indeed put to death, but the New Testament declares that He rose from the dead and lives forever. In Revelation 1:18, Jesus declares, "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore." Thus, His resurrection provides a far greater fulfillment of prolonged life than the addition of a few ordinary years to His earthly lifespan.

Objection #12: How could the days of God be prolonged?

The final objection takes the previous argument a step further. Since Christians believe that Jesus is God manifested in the flesh, critics ask how His days could possibly be prolonged when God is eternal and has neither beginning nor end.

The answer involves the distinction between Christ's eternal divinity and the genuine human life He assumed through His incarnation. Christianity does not teach that God ceased to exist when Jesus died or that His eternal existence somehow needed to be extended. Rather, as a genuine man, Jesus truly entered human history, suffered physical death, and subsequently rose bodily from the grave. The

prophecy concerns the suffering, death, and subsequent life of the incarnate Messiah. His resurrection demonstrates that death could not hold Him and that He would live forever, accomplishing the purposes for which the Father sent Him.

These twelve objections illustrate how individual expressions within Isaiah 53 can be misunderstood when separated from their immediate context or the larger biblical testimony concerning Jesus Christ. Examined alongside the Gospel accounts, these supposed contradictions lose their force. The same Jesus who was rejected, condemned, and crucified also rose from the dead, fulfilling the extraordinary portrait of the suffering and ultimately victorious Servant described by Isaiah.

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CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

The evidence presented throughout this study leads us to a remarkable conclusion: the Suffering Servant described in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is none other than the promised Messiah of Israel, Jesus Christ. Centuries before His birth, Isaiah described a righteous individual who would be despised and rejected, endure terrible suffering, be unjustly condemned, and ultimately be put to death. Yet His death would not be the end of His mission. The same prophecy anticipates His continued life, the extraordinary results of His sacrifice, and His ultimate exaltation. These details correspond with the events surrounding Jesus' suffering, crucifixion, resurrection, and the salvation accomplished through His redemptive work.

The historical and textual evidence makes this prophecy especially compelling. The discovery of ancient manuscripts, including the Great Isaiah Scroll, confirms that these words were already part of the Jewish Scriptures long before the coming of Jesus. Furthermore, the identification of Isaiah 53 with the Messiah was not an interpretation invented by Christians. As we have demonstrated, Jewish interpretive tradition itself preserves substantial testimony to the messianic understanding of this passage. The text itself also establishes that the Suffering Servant cannot be the collective nation of Israel, since Isaiah

describes Him as the morally perfect One (Isaiah 53:9, 11) appointed to restore Israel to God (Isaiah 49:5-6) and suffer for the sins of His people (Isaiah 53:8).

But beyond the remarkable prophetic correspondences, we must not overlook the central message of Isaiah 53. The Messiah would suffer, not because of His own wrongdoing, but because of ours. Isaiah declares that "the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). The suffering and death of Jesus Christ were not an unexpected defeat or a failure of His messianic mission. They were the very means through which God accomplished His promised redemption. The same Messiah who willingly endured the cross will return in glory to fulfill the remaining promises concerning Israel's restoration and His righteous earthly Kingdom.

Fulfilled biblical prophecy provides some of the most compelling evidence of the Bible's supernatural authorship. No human writer could have known, centuries in advance, the extraordinary details surrounding the Messiah's rejection, suffering, sacrificial death, and ultimate vindication – yet these are precisely the events Isaiah foretold and Jesus Christ fulfilled. The ability to declare history before it unfolds points to the divine Author of Scripture, who alone knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:9-10).

But Isaiah 53 does more than demonstrate the supernatural origin of the Bible. It reveals the heart of God's plan of salvation and the incredible sacrifice through which sinful humanity can be reconciled to Him. The evidence points overwhelmingly to Jesus Christ as the promised Suffering Servant, the Messiah of Israel, and the Savior of the world. Through His death and resurrection, the way of forgiveness and eternal life has been opened to all who place their faith in Him. This is the extraordinary message Isaiah foretold centuries before Jesus came into the world, and it remains just as relevant today.

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