

THE ISALAH 53 PROPHECY

THE MESSIAH AS THE
“SUFFERING SERVANT”



MICHAEL FILIPEK

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What sets the Bible apart from other religious books is that it contains thousands of prophecies. Since Jesus Christ is the central figure of the Bible, it should come as no surprise that the Bible is absolutely full of incredibly detailed prophecies about Him. One of the most astonishing prophetic chapters is Isaiah 53. Seven hundred years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah wrote this incredible prophetic portrait of the Messiah in His redemptive role as a “Suffering Servant.” Isaiah 53 records in vivid detail the mission and purpose of the Messiah in His First Coming on earth.

Note: The Messiah in Old Testament Judaism is a savior and liberator figure who is believed to be the future redeemer of the Jewish people. This belief comes directly from the Old Testament scriptures given by God to Israel which prophesied of this coming Messiah.¹

But why does it matter that the Bible is full of prophecies? Why are we even taking the time to study this? How does this affect our perception of the existence of God and of scripture as being His inspired Word? Let’s begin by answering these important questions, which will help us establish our prophetic perspective. The first thing

we need to do is examine three epistemological anchor points that form the basis of our belief in the supernatural origin of the Bible.

As we begin, the first thing we need to do is examine three epistemological anchor points that form the basis of our belief in the supernatural origin of the Bible. But first, what is epistemology?

Epistemology: The theory of knowledge, its method, its scope, and its limits. Epistemology is the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from opinion. It defines what we can actually **know**.²

So, let's examine the three points that form the basis of our epistemology.

-The Basis Of Our Epistemology:

1. The Bible is a highly **integrated message system**.
2. The Bible contains an astonishing amount of **prophecy**.
3. The Bible contains **intricately hidden subtleties encoded into the very text itself that clearly transcend the knowledge and intent of the human authors**.

Note: We can't fully describe each of the following three points here, but to better understand what we mean by each, please consult the companion study entitled "The Basis Of Our Epistemology".

During this study, we will mainly be investigating Biblical content having to do with Points #1 and 2 – involving **integration** and **prophecy**. These two points help support each other. Biblical prophecy proves integration, and Biblical integration involves prophecy. One of the primary ways you can validate the Bible's extra-dimensional origin is through its continual use of prophecy. Let's discuss this further.

As we mentioned, Biblical prophecy proves the integration of the Bible. Integration is a proof of extra-dimensional authorship because of the following reason – the Bible is one continuous story written

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over a period of almost 1,500 years, by many human authors who mostly didn't know each other and weren't alive at the same time, and yet, we find that the themes and events in scripture are woven together as one unified story. This points to a common Author who is behind it all, influencing and inspiring the human penmen who wrote down what they were inspired to say.

In other words, imagine your favorite novel or storybook...imagine you one day found out that the chapters were written by different people who mostly didn't know each other and weren't alive at the same time, over a period of 1,500 years ... yet, the storyline was flawless, or, to use our term, integrated. Obviously, this is impossible – especially when the earlier chapters predict how the later chapters would turn out with amazing precision – and its predictions align with the record of human history. This points to a common Author outside of time who was guiding and inspiring the human writers to compose this unified story. This is what we mean by integration.

Let's talk more about prophecy for a moment before continuing. What exactly do we mean by prophecy, and how exactly does this prove anything?

The Bible repeatedly demonstrates its uniqueness by making a habit of describing history before it happens. This is what we mean by prophecy. And if this statement is true, it would require then that the author knew what was going to happen ahead of time, which obviously the human writers couldn't. This characteristic of prophecy is a method of authentication that is unique to the true Author (God), because He exists outside of the dimension of time altogether and enjoys a one hundred percent success rate. In other words, we know the Bible cannot come from man – it must come from a Being outside of time itself.

So, we will find that prophecy is not just an odd curiosity – it's a demonstration that God is real, that He cares, and that He has chosen to reveal to us in advance what His plans are for the world, and for you and I personally. As we go through this study, keep in mind how the content we will examine demonstrates our epistemological anchor-points. So, with that backdrop in place, let's now begin to shift

our focus toward the topic of this study – the incredible prophecies in Isaiah 53.

Isaiah was a Hebrew prophet who lived about seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ.³ Isaiah Chapter 53 is one of the most incredible prophecies in the Bible, detailing the purpose and achievement of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion with more detail and precision than all of Paul’s epistles combined.

Because the prophetic content of this chapter so precisely portrays the experience of Jesus Christ on the cross – as recorded in the New Testament gospels – Isaiah 53 has predictably come under attack by the critics. There are two major areas in which this passage is attacked.

First, as usual, the critics may try to claim that Isaiah (or Chapter 53) was written after the fact, or was inserted into Isaiah later. Fortunately, more recent archaeological revelations have virtually eliminated this claim by the critics.

Second, the group with the greatest objection to Jesus as being the Jewish Messiah (obviously the Jews), object by denying that Chapter 53 is speaking prophetically of the Messiah. Because the Jews refuse to acknowledge Jesus as their Messiah – yet this passage so clearly depicts the trials of Christ – they are forced to instead claim it is speaking of Israel as a whole or possibly Isaiah himself (instead of the Messiah). That is their only way of sidestepping the obvious conclusion that it anticipated Christ.

So, before delving into an exploration of the details of this prophecy, we need to spend some time invalidating these two outlandish objections by the critics. To do this, we will focus first on an examination of the **manuscript evidence** that demonstrates Isaiah 53 as being written long before the time of Christ, establishing it as genuine prophetic writing.

Following that, we will then focus on the longstanding tradition of **rabbinical endorsement** of Chapter 53 as referring to the Messiah, which also helps us establish this passage as genuine Messianic prophecy despite the claims of modern rabbis.

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1. -Wikipedia contributors, "Messiah in Judaism," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Messiah_in_Judaism - Retrieved 7/19/19)
2. -Merriam-Webster, entry "Epistemology," *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*. (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epistemology> - Retrieved 11/11/18)
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CHAPTER 2

ISAIAH 53 AS AUTHENTIC PROPHECY - MANUSCRIPT EVIDENCE

Let's begin by examining the evidence that shows that the Book of Isaiah – and more specifically, Chapter 53 – was undoubtedly written well in advance of the events it so precisely prophesies about.

The Book of Isaiah turns out to be perhaps the most well-documented book of the Bible known to us. Isaiah, and more specifically, Chapter 53, survives in a number of manuscript traditions, including:

- **The Septuagint text** (second to third centuries BC) – the Hebrew Bible translated into Greek).

Isaiah 53 is validated as genuine prophecy by its inclusion in the Greek Septuagint translation,¹ completed several centuries before Christ. The plain fact that it was included in the Septuagint is the consensus belief among even skeptical scholars, and no serious scholar would deny it.²

- **The Great Isaiah Scroll**, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls (second century BC) – these are the mainly Hebrew ancient Jewish manuscripts found in the Qumran caves in the West Bank near the Dead Sea).

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The Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa^a) is one of the original seven Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in Qumran in 1947. It is the largest and best preserved of all the Biblical scrolls, and the only one that is almost complete. The document contains all sixty-six chapters of the Book of Isaiah written in Hebrew. Dating from the second century BC, it is also one of the oldest of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which makes it about a thousand years older than the next oldest Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible known to us before the Scrolls' discovery – a fact we will also highlight in our next point.^{3 4}

- **The Masoretic Text** (tenth century AD) – the Hebrew/Aramaic text of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament).⁵

The Masoretic Text is well-known to Christians, as it is the Hebrew source for most of our English Old Testaments. Although the earliest known manuscript of the Masoretic Hebrew Bible comes from around the tenth century AD, we mention the Masoretic Text to highlight the fact that the Dead Sea Scrolls manuscript of Isaiah was found by scholars to be almost identical to this tenth century manuscript. In other words, over a span of one thousand years, the text remained almost exact, allowing us to recognize the incredible reliability of our current text of Isaiah.⁶

So, due to its inclusion in both the Septuagint and Dead Sea Scrolls (both dating to several centuries before Christ), Isaiah 53 is proven to predate the life of Christ, establishing it as genuine prophecy. We can compare our current book of Isaiah to that of the Septuagint and Dead Sea Scrolls and verify that it hasn't significantly changed over the course of thousands of years of textual transmission. The majority of the Septuagint, Masoretic Text and the Dead Sea Scrolls are remarkably similar, dispelling unfounded theories that the Biblical text has been corrupted by time and conspiracy. What we see in the text today is what was there thousands of years ago.⁷

It is critical to recognize the significance of having in our possession, Biblical manuscripts that span over a thousand years and yet maintain only slight and largely insignificant variations. We now have absolute

evidence that Messianic prophecies contained in today's Old Testament (or the Jewish Bible) are the same Messianic prophecies that existed well prior to the time Jesus walked the earth.

All theories of first century AD conspiracies and prophecy manipulation go out the door when we realize that prophetic scripture passages like Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, Daniel 9, and others were fixed in written form at a minimum of several hundred years before Christ, but probably much earlier, exactly at the times the Bible claims. Keep in mind that the dates we examined (second century BC) are only the dates for the the **earliest existing** manuscript copies we have presently. **This implies that the originals were likely written far earlier.**

With that background in place, we will now examine whether or not there is evidence that Isaiah 53 has always been considered Messianic, or if it is simply a more recent Christian invention based on its eerie accuracy regarding the death of Christ.

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 7. -Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

ISAIAH 53 AS MESSIANIC PROPHECY - RABBINICAL ENDORSEMENT

Isaiah 53 is one of the greatest of all the Messianic prophecies in the Old Testament, expressing the Messianic figure as a “Suffering Servant.” Though today’s Jews adamantly deny it, it is well documented that this chapter has been long understood by the rabbis of Judaism to speak of the Messiah who would one day arrive.

Interestingly, many religious Jews today are actually quite unfamiliar with this chapter – and we must wonder whether this can truly be accidental or coincidental. Astonishingly, Isaiah 53 is actually left off of the calendar for synagogue readings in Jewish congregations – called the weekly *haftarah*! The cyclical synagogue readings go from Isaiah Chapters 52 to 54, skipping over Chapter 53. For this reason, many Christians refer to Isaiah 53 as the “forbidden chapter” among Jews.¹

It is a fact that many Jews have come to faith in Jesus Christ as their true Messiah through reading Isaiah 53. Jewish Christian author Dr. Mitch Glaser provides a number of these personal testimonies in his book *Isaiah 53 Explained*.²

As we will demonstrate in this chapter, the ancient Jewish rabbis were largely in agreement that this chapter referred to the Messiah – and their expectation was that a personal suffering Messiah figure

would fulfill it. In opposition to this mainline view, there developed an alternative interpretation proposing that Isaiah was actually speaking of the collective fate of the nation of Israel (rather than speaking of a personal Messiah). Although it gained somewhat of a following, most of the rabbis throughout that time (such as Maimonides and many others) rejected this interpretation, refusing to abandon the original Messianic view.

In a further chapter, we will address this deviant view, as well as a number of other Jewish objections that have been circulated. But for now, we will focus our attention on presenting the overwhelming testimony of the Jewish sages who, even throughout the Christian era, maintained the original Messianic interpretation. It has only been in more recent times that mainstream Jewish belief has radically shifted to embrace this alternative view. We will let you come to your own conclusion as to why they have chosen to do that, as well as the suspicious manner in which Isaiah 53 is skipped over in their calendar of synagogue readings.

The following is just a small sampling of what Judaism has traditionally believed about the identity of the “Suffering Servant” of Isaiah 53, beginning all the way back in the first century AD – contemporary with the New Testament authors. As you will see, this list includes the heavyweights of rabbinic Judaism – rabbis who are regarded as the leading sages by Jews not only throughout history, but still today. Let’s begin.

Targum Jonathan

Targum Jonathan is a well-known Aramaic translation of the Prophets (including Isaiah) thought to have been composed between 150 BC and 350 AD. The authorship of the Targum is attributed to Jonathan ben Uzziel, a leading student of the great Talmudic sage Hillel.³

Note: A Targum is the Jewish term for an Aramaic translation, explanation, or paraphrase of a portion of the Hebrew scriptures. This

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became necessary for synagogue teaching in the Second Temple Period (c. 516 BC to 70 AD), as most Jews had lost the knowledge of Hebrew and instead spoke Aramaic.

Targum Jonathan clearly attributes the subject matter of Isaiah 53 to the Messiah. A few verses earlier, in Chapter 52, Verse 13 (which begins the subject that continues into Chapter 53), it is rendered as “Behold, my servant the Messiah shall prosper...”⁴

The Babylonian Talmud

The Babylonian Talmud, assembled between the first and sixth centuries AD, is the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law and Jewish theology.⁵ *The Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Sanhedrin, 98b (composed around 450-550 AD), states the following, clearly associating the Messiah with quoted content from Isaiah 53.

“The Messiah, what is his name? The Rabbis say, The Leper Scholar, as it is said, ‘surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him a leper, smitten of God and afflicted...’”⁶

Maimonides

Moshe ben Maimon, or Moses Maimonides, also known as the Rambam, lived in the twelfth century AD, and is considered to be among the greatest Jewish scholars of all time.⁷ In his *Epistle to Yemen*, Maimonides clearly identified the content of Isaiah 53 as being prophecy related to the Messiah.

“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' (Zechariah 6:12). 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.”⁸

Rabbi Moshe Alshich

Rabbi Moshe Alshich was a famous Jewish scholar who lived in the late 1500s. He published at least nineteen works, most of them being Biblical commentaries.⁹ In his book *Marot haZobeot*, he gives his commentary on the writings of the prophets. In the following quote (the context of which involves Isaiah 53), Alshich confirms that not only he, but many rabbis all acknowledge the Messianic content of Isaiah 53.

“Our Rabbis with one voice accept and affirm the opinion that the prophet is speaking of the King Messiah, and we shall ourselves adhere to the same view.”¹⁰

The Midrash

A midrash is like a parable. It is a Jewish teaching tool that uses an explanation or story to give details or a modern application for an old teaching found in Jewish scripture. The Midrash refers to a collection of Jewish interpretive commentaries on scripture.

The Soncino translation of the Midrash on Chapter 2 of the Book of Ruth (Ruth Rabbah 5:6), provides a number of rabbinic interpretations on Ruth 2:14. Ruth Rabbah 5:6 lists the fifth interpretation as being Messianic. This is relevant to us because they list Isaiah 53:5 as being a Messianic proof text. It says the following.

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“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).”¹¹

Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas

Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas, was a well-known Jewish rabbi in sixteenth century Ottoman Palestine.¹² De Vidas wrote the following, quoting Isaiah 53 and applying it to the suffering Messiah.

“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.”¹³

This is just a small list of the testimony of the heavyweights of Rabbinic Judaism. These sources were not some obscure or little-known rabbis, but rather, the major figures and writings within their tradition.

In addition to the Jewish sources, Christian scholarship has also long recorded the fact that Isaiah 53 was traditionally considered Messianic prophecy by the Jewish sages. In an article on “Messiah” in the *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, we are told that the Jewish scholars during the early Christian era clearly thought that this passage was Messianic. They paraphrase Isaiah 42:1 as “Behold my Servant Messiah” and Isaiah 53 as “Behold my Servant Messiah will prosper.”¹⁴

Further, the well-known Jewish Christian Bible scholar Arnold Fruchtenbaum points out...

“All of the ancient Jewish writings – the Mishnah, the Gemara, (the Talmud), the Midrashim and many others – all regard this portion of

scripture as relating to the Messianic Person.”¹⁵

So, we find that no matter the time period, key Jewish sources can be cited affirming the Messianic nature of Isaiah 53. **We can comfortably conclude that the traditional Jewish interpretation was always that this passage referred to the Messiah.**

But there seems to have been a shift as time passed, in which the mainstream position within Judaism has embraced a view that denies Messianic meaning in Isaiah 53. Could this be due to the precision of Isaiah 53's content with the New Testament accounts of Jesus? Let's examine this passage for ourselves and we will let you decide...

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 2. -Ibid., Chapter 12.
 3. -“Targum Jonathan on Isaiah,” *Sefaria.org*. (https://www.sefaria.org/Targum_Jonathan_on_Isaiah?lang=en - Retrieved 4/01/21)
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 13. -Driver and Neubauer, pp. 385-386.
 14. -*Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, article “Messiah,” ed. Philip W. Comfort and Walter A. Elwell, Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001, p. 883.
 15. -Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Messianic Christology: A Study of Old Testament Prophecy Concerning the First Coming of the Messiah*, Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1998, p. 55.

CHAPTER 4

A PROPHETIC EXAMINATION OF ISAIAH 53

Let's now take a look the incredible prophetic content of Isaiah 53. We will actually begin in the previous chapter, Chapter 52, as this prophecy regarding the Messiah really begins there, at Verse 13.

Isaiah 52:13-15

“Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high.

As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men:

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

This verse begins with a reference to “my servant,” a Messianic allusion. The term “servant” is supposed to connect back to sections earlier in the book that speak of “the servant of the Lord” (for exam-

ple, in Chapters 42, 49, and 50, where the Messiah is described as a servant that suffers).

It initially seems contradictory, as it claims He will be “exalted and extolled, and be very high,” yet the next verse describes Him as being disfigured by all of His suffering – “his visage (meaning his face or appearance) was so marred (meaning disfigured) more than any man...” Consider this prophecy (and those that will follow in Chapter 53) with the following excerpt from its fulfillment, as recorded in Mark 15.

“And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, **when he had scourged him, to be crucified.**

And the soldiers led him away into the hall, called Praetorium; and they call together the whole band.

And they clothed him with purple, and **platted a crown of thorns, and put it about his head,**

And began to salute him, Hail, King of the Jews!

And **they smote him on the head with a reed, and did spit upon him,** and bowing their knees worshipped him.

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

This passage gives us some picture of the suffering Jesus endured, which actually reached the point of disfigurement. But as Verse 13 alluded to, this experience would ultimately lead to Christ being exalted, extolled, and lifted high through His resurrection, victory over death and sin, and ascension into heaven to sit at the “right hand of the Father.” We see this fulfillment referenced throughout the New Testament, but summarized nicely in Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians.

“Which he (*God*) wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places,

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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:

And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church,

Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.”

-Ephesians 1:20-23

In Verse 15 of the excerpt from Isaiah 52, we read how it said, “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.” Interestingly, the phrase, “So shall He sprinkle many nations” seems to be a clear reference to the sprinkling of the blood on the Mercy Seat of God in the Holy of Holies by the High Priest during Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16:14).

The garments of the High Priest were covered with blood after he had performed this task (Leviticus 6:27). The garments were afterwards replaced with white ones – symbolic of God saying that He had forgiven their sins.

This was a prophetic picture of Christ’s redemptive work on the cross, with the garment (symbolic of man’s life), being sprinkled by blood (the blood of Jesus on the cross), which covered man’s sins, providing forgiveness, and thus his garment was turned white. This brings to mind another prophecy written by 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 concept is also expressed in Revelation, showing us a preview of what will come.

“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;

And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they?

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

The New Testament also specifically speaks of Christ being our High Priest, and sprinkling His blood for us.

“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

“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

Isaiah 53:1

“Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?”

-Isaiah 53:1

Prophetically, Isaiah anticipates at least two things here. First, he anticipates how strange and contradictory it seems that this suffering Messiah, whose “visage (or the appearance of His face) is marred more than any man” is at the same time bringing salvation and cleansing to the nations. Second, he anticipates the rejection of the Messiah, that many would not “believe our report.”

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The second half of the verse reads, “and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?” Earlier, in Chapter 40, Isaiah declared that the “arm of the Lord” would rule for Him. In Chapter 51, he prophesies that the Gentiles would put their hope in the “arm of the Lord,” and the “arm of the Lord” would redeem. In Chapter 52 the “arm of the Lord” brings salvation.

Although at first it may seem ironic that this “arm of the Lord” phrase – which exemplifies strength and power – would be used to describe the suffering Messiah. But as the resurrection of Christ will reveal, the strength, power, and might of God will be expressed in the midst of this suffering, and seemingly weak Messiah through His utter triumph over death, sin, and Satan.

Isaiah 53:2

“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

God had begun issuing forth prophecies through the Old Testament prophets, referring to the coming Messianic figure by using the imagery of a branch, tree, or plant. For example, we also see this imagery used in Jeremiah 23 to describe the Messiah.

“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.

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

Similarly, we also see this earlier in Isaiah – in Chapter 11.

“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

And of course, the verse we are currently examining, Isaiah 53:2, fits right in here. The figure described here grows up as “a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground.” The Jewish nation – due to their habit of continually breaking and neglecting the Covenant given to them by God – had been laid low by several foreign powers in the centuries preceding the birth of Christ. Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman invasions had held a stranglehold upon the rebellious Hebrew people. The “blessings and cursings” prophecy given in Deuteronomy 28 had foretold the grim outcome of a nation who had rejected the Covenant obligations they agreed to. The nation of Israel had become but a “dry ground” compared to its glorious past.

Throughout the four hundred years prior to Christ, there was a notable absence of the voice of the prophets. Prior to this “dead and dry” period, God had repeatedly sent prophets to try to reach the people – but they were continually rejected. The prophecy found in Daniel 11 anticipated this dry-ground period, in which the nation of the Jews would be caught in the middle of constant conflict, as they were the buffer state between the warring kingdoms of the North and the South (the Seleucids and the Ptolemies). Yet from this apparent deadness, a Messianic “branch” would spring up, and would bring redemption.

This passage introduces to us a Servant of the Lord who would not stand out due to His good looks, wealth, popularity, charismatic personality, or obvious royal background. Rather, as we will continue to see in the following verse as well, the person described by Isaiah is depicted as marginalized and misunderstood by society. This was a Messiah who would enter in total humility. This is precisely descriptive of Jesus, who was born in a manger where animals feed (Luke 2:7), and grew up in a small, obscure Jewish town (Luke 2:39), fitting the exact prediction of these words.

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Isaiah 53:3

“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

Despite being marginalized by society, this Messiah exemplifies an extraordinary selflessness, and willingly suffers for the benefit of those who reject Him and treat him badly. He is willing to part with His limited earthly possessions, health, reputation, and dignity for the sake of those who are completely unworthy and unappreciative.

This prophecy is precisely characteristic of Jesus, as He was despised and rejected by the Jews as a nation. This idea of “we hid as it were our faces from him” expresses how the Jews – His own people – considered Him to be some kind of social misfit. It describes them hiding their faces from him, or in other words, looking away from him deliberately – the way you might look away when you cross paths with someone who you’re embarrassed to be seen with in public. Additionally, His death – at their hands – was so repulsive and gruesome that it would lead men to hide their faces and look away.

Who would ever expect the Old Testament to describe the long-awaited King Messiah as being despised, rejected and acquainted with grief and sorrow? Amazingly, that is exactly what happened. Jesus – at His First Coming – was rejected and put through excruciating torment by His own people, who “esteemed him not” as the Messiah – and still don’t.

Isaiah 53:4-6

“Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

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

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

The first part of this passage describes the Messiah bearing the Jews’ griefs and carrying their sorrows. The Messiah suffered in their (and our) place – He carried the sicknesses, the suffering, the pain, and the sins the Jews (and all mankind) have committed. The passage then says, “yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.” In other words, the Jews thought He was being punished, and that His suffering was God’s punishment for sins that He Himself had committed. They didn’t recognize that His suffering was in place of us for the sins that we all – as humans – have committed.

The passage then describes Him being “wounded (or pierced) for our transgressions...bruised for our iniquities...the chastisement of our peace was upon him...” It is important to first point out that this word translated “wounded” in the KJV is the Hebrew word *chalal* (Strong’s #H2490a), meaning “to bore, or pierce.”¹

This description precisely describes the suffering Jesus endured on the cross, as his hands, feet, and side were pierced. But now, the prophet explains why. It was for us, for our transgressions and our iniquities. It was in our place that the Messiah suffered.

We then see the phrase, “by his stripes we are healed,” in which the prophet sees through the centuries to know that the Messiah would be beaten with many stripes (Mark 15:15). Furthermore, the prophet announces that provision for healing is found in the suffering of Jesus, so by his stripes we are healed.

There has been much debate as to whether Isaiah had in mind spiritual healing or physical healing. But this passage is quoted in the New Testament several times, giving us plenty of insight. First, in Matthew 8:16-17, the view seems to be of physical healing.

“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:

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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

Yet, in 1 Peter 2:24-25, the view seems to be that of spiritual healing.

“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.

For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.”

-1 Peter 2:24-25

So, we can safely say that God has both aspects of healing in view, and both our physical and spiritual healing is provided for by the suffering of Jesus.

Next, we see the phrase, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way...” Here, the prophet describes our need for the Messiah’s atoning work. Sheep are stupid, headstrong animals, and we (like sheep often do) have gone astray. We have turned against God’s way, and every one to his own way.

And finally, we see the phrase, “and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Here, the prophet gives us a picture of the roles/relationships/manifestations God used in order to accomplish His work of redemption. We see the role of the Son in Jesus – as a genuine human, and yet as God – being the example of sinless perfection, acting as the necessary atoning sacrifice for the sins of all mankind. So, we see that the role of the Son was necessary as our human Kinsman Redeemer, and God the Father laid upon Him all of the iniquities of fallen man.

Isaiah 53:7

MICHAEL FILIPEK

“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

Here, Isaiah gives us a picture of the fact that although Jesus suffered greatly, He never opened His mouth to defend Himself. Although He Himself had done no wrong, He was silent in front of His accusers. We see this recorded in the gospel of Mark.

“And Pilate asked him, Art thou the King of the Jews? And he answering said unto them, Thou sayest it.

And the chief priests accused him of many things: but he answered nothing.

And Pilate asked him again, saying, Answerest thou nothing? behold how many things they witness against thee.

But Jesus yet answered nothing; so that Pilate marvelled.”

-Mark 15:2-5

We should recognize that in order to accomplish His mission, Jesus **had** to refrain from defending Himself. He was coming to die in **our** place, with **our** sins laid upon Him. So, in that sense, He **was** guilty – guilty on **our** account.

Isaiah 53:8

“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

First, let’s discuss the phrase “He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation?” Here, the prophet anticipates the wrongful imprisonment and illegal overnight trials of

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Jesus. Additionally, it also speaks to the fact that the Messiah died childless, with no one to “declare His generation.”

Next, we see the phrases, “for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.” This is the first definitive statement in this prophetic chapter that clearly declares that the Messiah would die. Up until this point, we might have thought He would only have been severely beaten. But there is now no mistaking the point: He is to be “cut off out of land of the living.”

And then, again, the prophet reinforces the same message that has been communicated throughout this prophecy. The Messiah, was to suffer – not for Himself – but for “the transgression of my people.” Clearly, these prophecies were all brilliantly fulfilled in Jesus, as the New Testament records.

Isaiah 53:9

“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

Jesus died in the company of the wicked, since He was crucified between two criminals (Luke 23:32-33), and it was the intention of those supervising His execution to cast Him into a common grave with the wicked.

But despite their intentions, Jesus was buried in the tomb of a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:50-56). He had done no violence, and yet was put to death as a criminal, among criminals, innocently bearing the imputed sins of all mankind.

Isaiah 53:10-11

“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.

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

First, we see the phrases, “Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief.” Here, the prophet opens up a window of incredible revelation to us – revelation that would later be expounded upon in the New Testament. Isaiah gloriously, and emphatically, states that the suffering of the Messiah was ordained by the Lord, even for His **pleasure!**

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul tells us the following in 2 Corinthians 5:19.

“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

God’s manifestations as the Father and the Son worked together at the cross. Though as a man, Jesus was treated as if He were an enemy of God, He was not. Even though Jesus was punished as if He were a sinner, He was actually performing the most holy service unto God the Father. This is why Isaiah can say, “yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him.” In and of itself, of course the suffering of the Son did not please the Father. But as it accomplished the work of reconciling the world to Himself, it was completely pleasing to God the Father.

An even deeper understanding of this is that God’s plan the whole time was to separate for Himself a bride. We know now, through the writings of the New Testament, that the Church is this bride (Ephesians 5:31-32; 2 Corinthians 11:2; et al.)!

The writer of Hebrews also describes this theme of there being pleasure in the midst of the suffering of the cross.

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“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

Jesus went to the cross with joy, “despising the shame.” The word despising here is the Greek word *kataphroneo* (Strong’s #G2706), meaning “to think little of, or to disregard”.² In other words, Jesus endured the cross with joy, and considered His suffering and shame as nothing compared to the joy of receiving you and I as His bride! Through all of the shame and agony He endured, He just ignored it ... because He considered us worth it!

Jesus was no victim of circumstance, nor was He at the mercy of political or military powers. It was the planned, ordained work of God, prophesied by Isaiah hundreds of years before it happened. This was not Satan’s or man’s triumph but rather, God’s victory – and the main purpose of it was that through the experience of the cross, He could have us as His beloved bride and save all of mankind.

With this backdrop in place, the rest of Verses 10 and 11 should make sense. We read, “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.”

The death and burial of the Messiah did not end this story – because of the resurrection, He lives on – He has “prolonged his days.” He has lived to see His spiritual “seed” – the Church – His spiritual descendants. We see this idea reflected in the New Testament writing of Paul to the Romans.

“...that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.”

-Romans 8:29b

Next, we see the phrase, “He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied.” Here, we see that the Messiah would look back upon His work – with full view of the travail of His soul – and in the end, He will be satisfied. This just drives home our previous point

concerning the joy and pleasure Jesus had in spite of the suffering of the cross. It shows us that the Messiah had no regrets about what He endured. He would view every bit of the agony and shame as being worth it – a satisfactory result.

And finally, we see the phrases, “by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.” It is in knowing the Messiah, in both who He is and what He has done, that makes us justified before God. In the New Testament, Paul wrote about how just as with Adam’s sin, all men were condemned, with Christ’s perfect sacrifice, all men can be justified through the free gift of salvation paid for by the cross.

“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 53:12

“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

In this final verse, Isaiah shows us how the Messiah’s glorious work will be rewarded. With the image of dividing the spoil after a victorious battle, we see that the Messiah ultimately triumphs. In the New Testament, Paul describes this ultimate triumph in Philippians 2:10-11a.

“That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;

And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord...”

-Philippians 2:10-11a

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But Verse 12 also says that the Messiah will “divide the spoil with the strong.” When all is said and done, Jesus will “divide the spoil with the strong” by making we who have obeyed Him, joint-heirs in His victory! Paul, again, writing to the Romans, described this.

“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

In the last few phrases of Verse 12, Isaiah declares that the Messiah would be “numbered with the transgressors,” “bare the sin of many,” and “make intercession for the transgressors.” Although Jesus could never become a sinner or a transgressor Himself, He was willing to be numbered amongst them in order to “bare the sins of many.” The truth is, that is speaking of all of us. We are all transgressors. Paul confirms this in his epistle to the Romans.

“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;”

-Romans 3:23

We recall that on the cross, Jesus “made intercession for the transgressors” as He prayed and bore the sins of humanity.

“Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.”

-Luke 23:34a

Though in its most specific sense, Jesus was speaking of those who were crucifying Him, in the larger sense, we can see how we all fall into that same camp of transgressors. The work of the Messiah – Jesus Christ – was made available to all transgressors. We can reach out and receive from Him the salvation that we all need. In the closing words of the Bible, we see this invitation extended to all who will come.

“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

To conclude, after going through a careful verse-by-verse and phrase-by-phrase analysis of Chapter 53, we should have an enhanced perception of the astonishing precision of Biblical prophecy. The idea that this passage could be so perfectly fulfilled by anyone – and it be all by accident or coincidence – is too far-fetched to imagine. This passage in Isaiah was placed there as a prophetic anticipation of the Messiah’s coming as the Suffering Servant – the Savior and Redeemer of not only the Jews, but all mankind. There was only one figure who fulfilled this prophecy with incredible precision – of course, that being the Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ. We see this recorded in vivid detail in the New Testament.

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1. -*Strong’s Concordance*, entry “2490a, chahal,” *BibleHub.com*. (<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2490a.htm> - Retrieved 11/20/18)
 2. -*Strong’s Concordance*, entry “2706, kataphroneó,” *BibleHub.com*. (<https://biblehub.com/greek/2706.htm> - Retrieved 11/20/18)

CHAPTER 5

HANDLING JEWISH OBJECTIONS - A DEEPER DIVE

In an earlier chapter of our study, we addressed the fact that the ancient Jewish rabbis consistently understood Isaiah 53 to speak of the Messiah. There, we provided numerous quotes from some of the top sources within rabbinic Judaism, going all the way back to the first century AD. Meanwhile, other Jews embraced an interpretation that claimed Isaiah was actually speaking of the collective fate of the nation of Israel (rather than speaking of a personal Messiah).

This debate on Isaiah 53 goes all the way back to the first several centuries of the Christian era. Even at this early stage, we have evidence that some Jews were already embracing this alternative explanation in order to defend against the arguments of Christians. The third century Christian theologian Origen recorded an early example of such a debate in his work *Against Celsus*.

“Now I remember that, on one occasion, at a disputation held with certain Jews, who were reckoned wise men, I quoted these prophecies; to which my Jewish opponent replied, that **these predictions bore reference to the whole people, regarded as one individual**, and as being in a state of dispersion and suffering, in order that many prose-

lytes might be gained, on account of the dispersion of the Jews among numerous heathen nations.”¹

While evidence for this alternative explanation goes back to these early times, it is also clear from the evidence presented in an earlier chapter that the mainline Jewish understanding still identified the Messiah as the subject of this chapter. Despite the allure of this alternative view as an answer to Christian polemics, it seems that the overtness of the chapter’s description forced many to maintain the “Suffering Messiah” view.

The alternative view was further popularized by the Medieval Jewish commentator known as Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Itzchaki, 1040-1105) as well as others who wished to dissuade Jews from converting to the Christian faith.² Rachmiel Frydland writes...

“(Rashi) wanted to preserve the Jewish people from accepting such a faith and, although his intentions were sincere, other prominent Jewish rabbis and leaders realized the inconsistencies of Rashi’s interpretation. They presented a threefold objection to his innovation. First, they showed the consensus of ancient opinion. Secondly, they pointed out that the text is in the singular. Thirdly, they noted verse eight. This verse presented an insurmountable difficulty to those who interpreted this passage as referring to Israel. It reads: ‘He was taken away from rule and from judgment; and his life who shall recount? for he was cut off out of the land of the living; through the transgressions of my people was he stricken.’

Were the Jewish people, God forbid, ever cut off out of the land of the living? No! In Jeremiah 31:35-37, God promised that we will exist forever. ... Likewise, it is impossible to say that Israel suffered for the transgressions of ‘my people,’ which clearly means Isaiah’s people. Surely Isaiah’s people are not the Gentiles, but the Jews. Moshe Kohen, a 15th Century rabbi in Spain, explains the section:

“This passage, the commentators (*like Rashi, who embraced the alternative view*) explain, speaks of the captivity of Israel, although the singular number is used in it throughout. Others have supposed it to

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mean the just in this present world, who are crushed and oppressed now...but these too, for the same reason, by altering the number, distort the verses from their natural meaning. And then it seemed to me that...having forsaken the knowledge of our Teachers, and inclined 'after the stubbornness of their own hearts,' and of their own opinion, I am pleased to interpret it, in accordance with the teaching of our Rabbis, of the King Messiah."³

Fryland further quotes the great Jewish educator, Herz Homberg (1749-1841), who likewise points out a major flaw in the claim that the figure in this passage is a collective Israel. Homberg wrote...

"According to the opinion of Rashi and Ibn Ezra, it relates to Israel at the end of their captivity. But if so, what can be the meaning of the passage, 'He was wounded for our transgressions'? Who was wounded? Who are the transgressors? Who carried out the sickness and bare the pain? The fact is that it refers to the King Messiah."⁴

In other words, Homberg recognizes the self-defeating nature of the proposition that Israel as a nation can't be stricken for itself. The passage is clear that a Messiah figure would bear the sins of the nation and be wounded for "our" (Isaiah's peoples') sins.

So, although he gained somewhat of a following, most of the rabbis throughout that time (such as the great Maimonides) rejected this alternative explanation and refused to abandon the original Messianic view. But in more recent times, mainstream Judaism has wholly embraced this view – and on this basis, they commonly accuse Christians of misinterpreting the context of Isaiah 53.

In this chapter, we will explore this alternative Jewish interpretation and put it to the test. And after that, we will also identify a number of other Jewish objections to the Messianic focus of this chapter. But before we even begin with those two tasks, we will first spend some time handling the Jews' overall objection to Jesus as being the Messiah.

The Overarching Jewish Objection to the Messianic Claims of Jesus

Overall, the Jewish objection to the Messianic identity of Jesus can be boiled down to a simple mistaken expectation related to their own Messianic prophecies. As we will demonstrate, this misunderstanding is predicated upon a number of assumptions that have become popular within Judaism – all incorrect assumptions. These assumptions can be summarized by the common Jewish statement that Jesus did not fulfill **all** of the Messianic prophecies when we walked the earth, and therefore, cannot be the Messiah. Although the answer to this is extremely simple, let's take some time to reason through it.

To examine this misunderstanding, we must first begin with an examination of the Jewish expectations for the Messianic figure. In his book *26 Reasons why Jews don't Believe in Jesus*, Asher Norman states that the job description of the Messiah is six-fold, and is as follows:

1. Have the correct genealogy by being descended from King David and King Solomon.
2. Be anointed King of Israel.
3. Return the Jewish people to Israel.
4. Rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.
5. Bring peace to the world and end all war.
6. Bring knowledge of God to the world.

He says that this excludes Jesus from consideration as the Messiah because He did not fulfill these six criteria when He walked the earth.⁵ These six expectations fall into the category of Messianic prophecies that may be referred to as the “Conquering King” prophecies, and they do comprise the larger part of the totality of Messianic prophecy in scripture. But as we continue, it is simple to see how rejecting Jesus on this basis is the result of a mistaken assumption by Jews.

First of all, Christians who take the Bible literally, absolutely **agree** that the prophets give a clear picture of the Messiah fulfilling these six objectives. Christians see these Messianic prophecies in the Hebrew

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scriptures just as clearly as do the Jews. Christians fully expect the Messiah's reigning with power on the earth as a descendant of David in a coming earthly thousand-year Kingdom, bringing about the redemption and ultimate regathering of Israel, introducing the end of war and the universal knowledge of God, and building the Millennial Temple in Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:1-4; Isaiah 11:1-9; Ezekiel 40-48; Daniel 2:44; Zechariah 14; et al.). And so, this is a fundamental part of the Christian expectation just as it is of the Jewish expectation.

However, there is another set of prophecies which speak of the Messiah enduring extreme rejection and suffering at the hand of His own people, leading to Him being "pierced," and being "cut off" (or executed) as an atonement for sin (Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Daniel 9:25-26; Zechariah 12:10). These may be referred to as the "Suffering Servant" Messianic prophecies. For example...

- Isaiah 53 tells us that this "Servant" is one on whom the Lord has laid "the iniquity of us all" and that "for the transgression of my people he was stricken."
- In Daniel 9:25-6 we read that "Messiah" will be "cut off, but not for himself" (meaning He will be put to death, but not for His own sins), and that it will happen before the destruction of the Second Temple.
- In Zechariah 12:10 we read that Israel (during a time of unparalleled distress over Jerusalem) will look to One whom they've pierced and mourn for Him "as for an only Son" – but that they will find redemption and deliverance through this One whom they look to.

And so, there is a seeming contradiction between the "Conquering King" and "Suffering Servant" descriptions of the Messiah in the Hebrew scriptures. Because of these two different portraits, in the third century AD, the idea of two different Messiahs arose – a "Messiah ben (son of) Joseph" who should suffer and die, and a "Messiah

ben David” who would reign in power. This was the Jewish attempt to reconcile the prophetic portrait of a suffering Messiah with the prophetic portrait of a reigning Messiah. The suffering Messiah was given the name “Son of Joseph” because he suffers rejection and humiliation like Joseph did in Egypt (in Genesis 37-41). The reigning Messiah was given the name “Son of David” because he reigns in triumph like King David.

In modern Judaism, the idea of the Suffering Servant Messiah seems to have been largely forgotten or de-emphasized (notice how none of the “suffering” criteria found their way into Norman’s list), and scriptures like Isaiah 53 have been applied to Israel’s sufferings instead of the sufferings of the Messiah. However, as we demonstrated earlier, this idea was not the original interpretation of religious Jews.

But this Jewish attempt to reconcile these two seemingly opposite prophetic portraits of the Messiah is evidence itself that they recognize the alleged “problem.” They simply drew a different conclusion from the Christians, attempting to solve this problem by postulating two different Messiahs. On the other hand, Christians, instead of suggesting two different Messiahs, recognize that these prophecies speak of one Messiah who will have two different Comings.

At His First Coming, His mission was the redemption of humanity, and therefore, He came in the role of the Suffering Servant, fulfilling among other things, the typology of the Mosaic sacrificial system. But at His Second Coming, scripture tells us He will return with a completely different mission. At this time, His mission will include the judgment of sin, the defeat of His enemies, the building of His Millennial Temple, the establishment of His righteous earthly Kingdom, the ultimate regathering of Israel, the bringing of peace through His righteous reign, and other objectives foretold in the prophets. And so, at this coming, He will come in the role of the Conquering King.

And so, we can easily see how the Jewish rejection of Jesus is built upon a mistaken premise or assumption. Because Jesus did not fulfill the Conquering King prophecies at His First Coming, they reject Him. But one must wonder, what if He hypothetically had performed His two missions in reverse! If Christ came as the Conquering King at His

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First Coming, would the Jews have rejected Him on the grounds that He didn't fulfill the Suffering Servant prophecies? That would be difficult to imagine! But it helps us recognize where they went off-track. The mistaken expectation can largely be attributed to basic human psychology.

At the time of Christ's First Coming, the Jews had endured centuries of oppression at the hands of Gentile kingdoms, culminating with the Roman occupation of Judea. Because their hearts longed for freedom, justice, and the righteous reign of the Messiah that had been promised to them by the prophets, they were not looking for a Suffering Servant Messiah. Instead, they were longing for the Conquering King Messiah who would free them from their physical bondage. But the Messiah knew that the first order of business was to provide spiritual freedom, and so He came first as the Suffering Servant Messiah – and as the prophecies foretell, suffered the rejection of His own people. And so, through their rejection of Jesus Christ as Messiah, they in effect were fulfilling their own scriptures that **require** the Messiah to be rejected by His people.

It really can be boiled down to the fact that because **all** of the Messianic prophecies were not fulfilled at the same time, the Jews irrationally rejected Jesus despite the fact that He fulfilled a multitude of Messianic prophecies that simply could not have been artificially arranged or concocted through human efforts. One scholar, J. Barton Payne, found as many as 574 verses in the Old Testament that somehow point to, describe, or reference the coming Messiah. Alfred Edersheim found 456 Old Testament verses referring to the Messiah or His times. **Conservatively, Jesus fulfilled at least three hundred of these prophecies in His earthly ministry.**⁶

In our companion study entitled "How Sure Can We Be That Jesus Was The Messiah Of Israel?" we demonstrate mathematically that based upon Jesus even fulfilling a fraction of those three hundred, **we can still be more sure of Jesus' Messianic identity than we can be of virtually any other fact in the universe.**

But after going through this simple explanation, it should be clear that this entire premise that Jesus couldn't be the Messiah on the

grounds that He didn't fulfill the Conquering King prophecies at His First Coming, is a logically flawed proposition that is solely based upon mistaken Jewish expectations. It is a fallacy, as further evidenced by the fact that they themselves tried to satisfy the supposed discrepancy between the two groupings of Messianic prophecies by proposing two different Messiahs. Why would they readily suggest two Messiahs to account for these different prophecies, and yet view as strange the idea of one Messiah with two different Comings? Both ideas would satisfy the Messianic criteria, and all of the scriptural passages seems to refer to One figure who would both suffer and reign.

Furthermore, if they propose two different Messiahs, then on what grounds could they reject Jesus as being at minimum, the Messiah ben Joseph – the suffering Messiah? Their “two Messiah” proposal actually requires a Messiah figure who would suffer but not reign. At His First Coming, Jesus suffered exactly as the prophecies require, but He did not reign. His suffering without reigning is the Jews' entire reasoning for rejecting Him, as Asher Norman demonstrated in his list! And yet they will not even acknowledge Him as the Messiah ben Joseph!

But hopefully it is clear that the idea that Jesus is not the Messiah because He didn't fulfill the Conquering King prophecies at His First Coming is a fallacy based upon the flawed premise that the Messiah must only have one coming and must fulfill all of the prophecies at the same time. There is nothing in scripture that requires this. Jesus Christ, the true Messiah of Israel **will** fulfill all of the remaining prophecies at His Second Coming, when He returns as the Conquering King. And because of the multitude of already-fulfilled prophecies related to His First Coming, we can have full assurance and earnest expectation of His return! Jesus, while He walked the earth, fulfilled the Messianic prophecies beyond competent dispute, as we demonstrate in our companion study. So, it can be easily determined that this overall Jewish objection on these grounds is without basis.

An Analysis of a Common Jewish Claim

Because of Isaiah 53's overt resemblance to the New Testament story of Jesus, religious Jews have attempted to distance this passage from Him by popularizing a contextual objection to the way Christians understand this chapter. We've already mentioned this objection at the outset of this chapter, and earlier in this study. We will spend some time addressing this objection. Let's begin by clearly stating this Jewish claim.

Jews often claim: The subject matter of Isaiah 53 is in reference to the collective nation of Israel rather than a specific Messianic person. Therefore, Christians are guilty of taking Isaiah 53 out of context, and therefore, arrive at the wrong conclusion regarding this chapter.

We should begin by pointing out that this claim itself is hampered by the evidence we've already shown earlier, in which we presented documented testimony from ancient Jewish sources going back thousands of years, admitting that the traditional view of Isaiah 53 was Messianic. Unless modern Jews are prepared to admit that their long-standing tradition of revered writings and rabbis were all wrong throughout history, then the case remains closed and we need not offer any more proof.

But that being said, as dubious as it is, we will now address this claim from a more critical or exegetical standpoint in order to further prove that the Christian view of Isaiah 53 is sound. So, let's take a closer look at the text itself and see if this common Jewish claim holds up to scrutiny.

An Exploration of the Greater Context of Isaiah

It is impossible to fully understand and appreciate Isaiah 53 without a larger panoramic understanding of the book of Isaiah and how this entire book prophetically summarizes the epic story of the Bible, especially from the standpoint and role of the nation of Israel in God's

plan. It prophetically anticipates everything from Israel's apostasy as a nation onward all the way to the Millennial Kingdom of the Messiah. So, let's begin to explore the panorama of Isaiah, beginning with the greater context, and then narrowing down our focus as we make our way into Chapter 53.

Chapters 1 through 39 in the book describe the themes of judgment, hope, and a future Messianic King that would come from the line of King David. But every generation of David's royal descendants, one by one, failed to be faithful, even leading Israel into open rebellion, idolatry, and rejection of God – this taking place over many centuries. Israel's unfaithfulness to God and to the Mosaic Covenant she had agreed to resulted in Israel's exile to Babylon, a catastrophic event of God's judgment that included the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BC. All of these themes are prophetically anticipated in Isaiah. Keep in mind that at the time this was written, in the eighth century BC, this Babylonian judgment, exile, and eventual return to the land was still hundreds of years in the future. Chapter 39 appears to leave very little hope for Israel or the lineage of David. But as we turn to Chapter 40, we step into a new world of hope. Right out of the gate, we hear a voice announcing...

“Comfort, comfort My people,’ says your God.

‘Speak kindly to Jerusalem;

And call out to her, that her warfare has ended,

That her guilt has been removed,

That she has received of the Lord's hand

Double for all her sins.”

-Isaiah 40:1-2 (NASB)

The vantage point of this prophetic voice is positioned after the exile, which is described here and elsewhere in scripture as a period of judgment that came about as a result of Israel's rejection of God. Now that Israel has paid its dues through a seventy-year Babylon captivity, God announces “comfort” and declares that a new day has dawned. He

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begins to introduce the hope of something new. What follows is a very famous Biblical prophetic poem. Let's pick up with Verses 3-5.

“The voice of one calling out,
‘Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness;
Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Let every valley be lifted up,
And every mountain and hill be made low;
And let the uneven ground become a plain,
And the rugged terrain a broad valley;
Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
And all flesh will see it together;
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.’”
-Isaiah 40:3-5 (NASB)

So, after all of the judgment, God began to herald the joyful good news of a coming revelation of the “glory of the Lord” that would be revealed to Israel. We are told that all will see this glory, which we clearly understand to be a Messianic expectation! It is made clear that this figure – this expected revelation that will be visible – will be God Himself coming in visible form (“Clear the way for **the Lord** in the wilderness”, “Make straight in the desert a highway for **our God**”).

This passage in Isaiah is the passage later quoted in the New Testament in Matthew, and its fulfillment is applied to John the Baptist – the one who preached in the wilderness, paving the way for the Messiah’s earthly ministry.

“This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:
‘A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”
-Matthew 3:3 (NIV)

But going back to Isaiah 40, we are also told that God would come and His “arm,” a reference to this figure, who is identified as the reve-

lation of the glory of God in visible form, would eventually and ultimately rule as a king. He would also act as a shepherd for His people.

“Behold, the Lord God will come with might,
With His arm ruling for Him.
Behold, His compensation is with Him,
And His reward before Him.
Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs
And carry them in the fold of His robe;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes.”
-Isaiah 40:10-11 (NASB)

After this great announcement full of good news, there is cause for high hopes and joyful expectation! There is reason to expect only good things to follow! But as we keep reading, we find that that’s not where the poem goes. Instead, it focuses on the response of the Israelites to this great announcement of hope. For example, we see in Isaiah 40:27...

“Why do you say, Jacob, and you assert, Israel,
‘My way is hidden from the Lord,
And the justice due me escapes the notice of my God’?”
-Isaiah 40:27 (NASB)

It appears that the Israelites are still bitter about the exile, and they think they’ve been ignored and abandoned by their God (remember, all of this is prophetic – it was written in the eighth century BC prior to there even being an exile). Interestingly though, the truth was the direct opposite. It was Israel who had abandoned God, which led to the judgment of the exile.

God’s response is what we find in Chapters 41 to 47. All of these prophetic poems are designed to be a sort of poetic courtroom, as God begins to set the record straight. God launches His case, declaring Himself to be the Creator of the world, the Lord of history, etc.

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First, is the fact that just as God promised through Isaiah, He would raise up the Persians and their king, Cyrus, to topple Babylon, who took them into exile (Isaiah 41:2-5, 25; 45:13). All of this was prophesied in detail by God here in Isaiah – even calling Cyrus by name and describing his exploits – about one hundred fifty years before he rose to power.

Then, next, is the exile itself. This tragedy was not the result of God’s neglect! Rather, it came about as a result of the Israelites’ idolatry and unfaithfulness (as described in Isaiah 43:22-28).

And then finally, there is the downfall of Babylon itself, which is the focus in Chapters 46 through 47 (keep in mind, again this is being spoken before Babylon was even brought to power, much less invaded Israel). This is a demonstration of God’s faithfulness on behalf of Israel, as He would bring down their former oppressor.

All of this evidence should’ve had an effect upon God’s covenant people. Experiencing the power, grace, and providence of their God should have motivated the Israelites, as a nation, to have become God’s “servant” who would bear witness to God’s justice and mercy before all the nations. This is what the poem in Isaiah 42 is all about. The idea was that the exile should have chastened and purified Israel (as Isaiah spoke about in the very first Chapter of his book) so that they might become “a light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6).

But unfortunately, that’s not what Israel would end up doing, and so, they would not become a light to the nations at that time – and that’s the whole point then focused on in Chapter 48. In fact, the *New American Standard Bible’s* title for the first part of Chapter 48 is, very appropriately, “Israel’s Obstinacy”! God foretold in advance that even after their seventy-year judgment through Babylon, the hearts of the people would not turn to true righteousness. In this chapter, God prophetically accuses the post-exile Israelites of continuing their idolatry while giving God only hollow allegiance, which at that time disqualified them from being God’s servant to bring His light to the nations. Instead, in Verse 6, God says He’s going to do a brand-new thing, hidden and unknown to them.

But then after this, and like a lightning bolt out of nowhere, we can

suddenly identify a new voice that speaks up, which we notice in Isaiah 48:16.

“Come near to Me, listen to this:

From the beginning I have not spoken in secret,

From the time it took place, I was there.

And now the Lord God has sent Me, **and His Spirit.**”

-Isaiah 48:16 (NASB)

Or as the *New International Version* puts it, “And now the Sovereign Lord has sent me, **endowed** with his Spirit.”

Who is this?! If your back up a few verses, it’s clear that this is not Isaiah speaking, as the speaker is identified as God in Verses 12 and 13. But here in Verse 16, this quote of God morphs into another new character speaking in the first person, still speaking as God, but saying that He is sent of God and filled or endowed with the Spirit of the Lord. It is still God, but He is now speaking as the Messiah, this Servant or “Arm of the Lord.”

This Messianic figure had also been alluded to earlier in Chapter 42, as He was described by God as one upon whom God’s Spirit would rest, and one who would ultimately bring justice to the nations.

“Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold;

My chosen one in whom My soul delights.

I have put My Spirit upon Him;

He will bring forth justice to the nations.

He will not cry out nor raise His voice,

Nor make His voice heard in the street.

A bent reed He will not break off

And a dimly burning wick He will not extinguish;

He will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not be disheartened or crushed

Until He has established justice on the earth;

And the coastlands will wait expectantly for His law.”

-Isaiah 42:1-4 (NIV)

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And this connects back even further to the introduction of this Messianic King from the line of David, described as the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” earlier in Isaiah 11:1. Back in Isaiah 11, we are told He was endowed with God’s Spirit in seven different ways, which we see in Isaiah 11:1-2.

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him –
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord...”
-Isaiah 11:1-2 (NIV)

And even earlier yet, this Messianic King was referenced to in Isaiah 9 as a great light, a coming Child, a Son that would be born, whose name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, and Prince of Peace. His kingdom is described as having no end, and He will reign as a descendant of David on David’s throne. This familiar passage reads as follows.

“The people who walk in darkness
Will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land,
The light will shine on them.
...
For a Child will be born to us, a Son will be given to us;
And the government will rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.
There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace
On the throne of David and over his kingdom,
To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness
From then on and forevermore.”
-Isaiah 9:2, and 6-7 (NASB)

So, we can see that this Messianic figure – who is consistently described as being God in fleshly form – is not a new development, but rather is a subject or theme constantly woven throughout Isaiah – each time revealing something more. And now, skipping back to Chapter 48, the Messiah – as God in the flesh – begins to speak Himself!

Here in Chapter 48, it appears He’s showing up on the scene after the exile (which we know Jesus did). However, now the story is more complex; He doesn’t just have a job to do among the nations, as Isaiah 11 described. He also has a job to do among the Israelites themselves, who are as spiritually hardened towards their God as ever – and themselves have become as ungodly as the other nations. This is the main point of Chapters 49 through 55 (including of course, Chapter 53), which describes this Servant’s mission, first to Israel and then to all nations.

In Isaiah 49, it seems as if Isaiah is prophetically speaking in the first person as if he were in the role of this Messiah figure, much like David does in Psalm 22. This chapter describes how this individual “Servant of Yahweh” is given the title “Israel” (in Verse 3) as He will represent the archetype of Israel (or what Israel was intended to be a prototype of). In other words, the Messiah is the representative man of the nation, and as we find out in Verse 6, is given Israel’s failed job of bringing God’s justice and good news to the world.

“He (*God*) says, ‘It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant
To raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the protected ones of
Israel;
I will also make You a light of the nations
So that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth.’”
-Isaiah 49:6 (NASB)

Of course, it is clear that this figure cannot be Israel itself, as Israel cannot raise up and restore Israel. Instead, it is the Messiah, who is the ultimate representative of the nation that will accomplish this mission. Furthermore, as we see in the next verse, we find that this

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Messiah figure would actually be despised and abhorred “by the nation,” or by Israel.

“This is what the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and its Holy One,
Says to the despised One,
To the One abhorred by the nation,”
-Isaiah 49:7a

Of course, Israel cannot despise and abhor herself. It speaks of a Messianic figure being despised and abhorred by another – “the nation.”

This description of a despised and abhorred Messiah is developed further in the following chapters. In Isaiah Chapter 50, the Servant Himself tells us that His message is rejected by His brethren, and graphically describes the way He would be beaten and forsaken. For instance, in Isaiah 50:6, we read...

“I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting.”
-Isaiah 50:6 (NIV)

The Messianic Servant had cheeks, a beard, and a face that endured horrific treatment at the hands of the nation that despised and abhorred Him. Clearly, this speaks of an individual (not a collective group) who underwent this ill treatment.

Nonetheless, the Servant has a message of good news: God is going to fulfill His great promises, issue His salvation, and bring His Kingdom over all nations (as we see in Isaiah Chapters 51-52)! Even though Israel failed in its mission, this Servant will not fail in His mission! He has embodied God’s original mission for the nation Israel, He is the representative Son of Israel, and He Himself will bring it to fulfillment! For instance, in Isaiah 51:4-5, God says...

“Listen to me, my people;
hear me, my nation:
Instruction will go out from me;
my justice will become a light to the nations.
My righteousness draws near speedily,
my salvation is on the way,
and my arm will bring justice to the nations.”
-Isaiah 51:4-5 (NIV)

We’re told that God is going to send good news, peace, and salvation to Israel through this Servant, who Isaiah also refers to as the “arm,” or the “Arm of the Lord.” In Chapter 52, we see a prophetic look forward to the ultimate fulfillments promised to Israel, in which all of God’s people will know His name, and they will see Him approaching Jerusalem bringing salvation and His Kingdom!

“Therefore my people will know my name;
therefore in that day they will know
that it is I who foretold it.
Yes, it is I.’
How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
‘Your God reigns!’
Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices;
together they shout for joy.
When the Lord returns to Zion,
they will see it with their own eyes.
Burst into songs of joy together,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.

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The Lord will lay bare his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see
the salvation of our God.”
-Isaiah 52:6-10 (NIV)

So, despite Israel’s failures, God is sending the good news of His promises, which this Servant of the Lord will bring into reality. His mission will be to bring this all to pass. But how would it happen? Not in the way Israel might have expected!

As we continue reading, this joyous language begins to temporarily disappear, and what follows this dramatic announcement of good news is the famous “Suffering Servant” poem that begins in Isaiah 52:13 and continues through the end of Isaiah 53 – the topic of our study.

As this segment begins in Chapter 52, Verses 13-15, we are given a synopsis of what this Messianic Servant will endure, and the ultimate purpose it will bring about. We are shown His suffering, but also the fulfilled destiny of His mission – that through His atonement, all nations can have relationship with God. It actually uses the word “sprinkle,” linking it with the ritual sprinkling of sacrificial blood onto the Mercy Seat during the yearly Hebrew festival of Atonement. This segment, narrated from the perspective of God, reads as follows.

“See, my servant will act wisely;
he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
Just as there were many who were appalled at him –
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being
and his form marred beyond human likeness –
so he will sprinkle many nations,
and kings will shut their mouths because of him.
For what they were not told, they will see,
and what they have not heard, they will understand.”
-Isaiah 52:13-15 (NIV)

This synopsis of the Servant's experiences and accomplishments is then broken down in more detail in Chapter 53 – the topic of our study. But as Chapter 53 begins, we notice a subtle but important change. The narration is now expressed from the standpoint of a group, as we will see in the constant first-person plural pronouns used in this chapter – such as “us”, “we,” and “our.” (“Who has believed **our** message...”, “He had no beauty or majesty to attract **us** to him...”, “nothing in his appearance that **we** should desire him.”)

And so, it becomes clear from this first-person plurality that Isaiah is writing this part as if he was speaking on behalf of the entire nation of Israel, who tells the story of the Servant. They describe how He at first appeared to them as a seemingly insignificant nobody, a man that was outwardly unimpressive, lowly and ordinary, a man of suffering and pain, and a man who they despised and rejected (Verses 1-3).

“Who has believed our report?

And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot,

And like a root out of dry ground;

He has no stately form or majesty

That we would look at Him,

Nor an appearance that we would take pleasure in Him.

He was despised and abandoned by men,

A man of great pain and familiar with sickness;

And like one from whom people hide their faces,

He was despised, and we had no regard for Him.”

-Isaiah 53:1-3 (NASB)

However, in Verses 4-6, they now acknowledge as a nation (Isaiah still speaking in the first-person plural) that they couldn't have been more wrong about Him, and they realize that in fact, He was suffering for them!

“Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,

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yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.”
-Isaiah 53:4-6 (NIV)

In reality, the Servant was rejected by the nation because of their sin and unfaithfulness, but that was the whole point of His mission! He took their sins upon Himself, and suffered on their behalf. He played the role of the perfect atoning sacrifice, bringing redemption and salvation. Isaiah continues this prophetic narrative of the Suffering Servant in Verses 7-9.

“He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.
He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.”
-Isaiah 53:7-9 (NIV)

But just like in the story of Joseph (which is actually a prophetic

type of the story of the Messiah), when his brothers planned to destroy him, God orchestrated their evil to result in good (as we're told in Genesis 50:20). Although he was rejected by his brethren, God intended it for good, and Joseph ended up actually saving his brethren!

In this same way, in Verse 10, Isaiah then begins to reveal that it was actually God's mysterious purpose that the Servant would die at the hands of Israel, because of their sin and on behalf of their sin – and through this, His death would play the role of a sacrificial sin offering, providing atonement for their evil and for that of all mankind. Through Him, many would be justified.

But incredibly, this isn't the end of the Servant's story! As Verse 10 continues up until Verse 12, we are told that after His rejection and death, the Servant will “look upon descendants and live long days” and “see the light and be satisfied” – necessitating that we understand He somehow experienced life after His death! Of course, this is a clear prophetic portrait of the resurrection of this Servant – and that this resurrection would result in Him seeing His offspring (which we understand as spiritual offspring, as the New Testament describes those who trust in this Messiah as becoming “sons of God”). Verses 10-12 read...

“Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.
After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,

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and made intercession for the transgressors.”

-Isaiah 53:10-12 (NIV)

And so, in the end, we are told that His death was actually the opposite of failure. It was His way of “bearing the sins” of His people so that the guilty “can be pronounced righteous” before God (like we saw in Verse 11). Guilty Israel, who not only ended up in exile for their continual wickedness and rejection of God, but who also killed God’s Servant who was sent to them, is now pronounced “righteous,” not for anything they did, but because of what the Servant did on their behalf.

The rest of Isaiah shows how the Servant then rescues a future remnant nation of Israel who will listen to His voice and follow Him into God’s new Kingdom. They will first face distress and persecution in the dark days of Tribulation that lie ahead (described in Isaiah Chapters 56-59 and in 63-65a), but ultimately, will inherit the Kingdom that God has in store (described in Chapters 60-62 and 65-66). The story ends with God bringing in this Kingdom in a restored heaven and earth, with a restored Jerusalem, and a restored Israel – bringing ultimate completion to the mission of the Messiah!

The book of Isaiah is truly remarkable. The entire story of Israel – from their rebellion forward – encapsulating the ultimate storyline of the Bible itself is summed up and projected into the future in this book. The poetry and narratives in Isaiah were foundational for Jesus’ mission, as evidenced by the way He picked up the book of Isaiah to read aloud in the synagogue as He introduced His earthly mission (recorded in Luke 4). Isaiah was included in the books of the Hebrew Bible that Jesus surveyed with His disciples after the resurrection, showing them that everything had been anticipated beforehand in the “Torah, the prophets, and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44-49). And the book of Isaiah was foundational for the early followers of Jesus, helping to motivate their mission to bring the gospel to the nations (in Acts 13:47).

If you don’t recall, this was the instance where Paul and Barnabas were preaching the gospel to the Jews – but the unbelieving Jews

rejected them. Paul and Barnabas then quoted Isaiah to validate their mission to bring the gospel to the Gentile nations. This passage reads...

“But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming. Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first. Since you repudiate it and consider yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us,

‘I have appointed You as a light to the Gentiles,
That You may bring salvation to the end of the earth.’”

When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and all who had been appointed to eternal life believed.””

-Acts 13:45-48 (NASB)

But this theme does not just come from the book of Isaiah. Ultimately, Isaiah’s portrait of the Suffering Servant King as the true victor over human evil wasn’t a novel idea. It’s a profound development of that strange, prophetic theme we were introduced to all the way back in Genesis 3:15 concerning the suffering seed or offspring of the woman, who would ultimately destroy the Serpent.

“And I (*God speaking*) will put enmity
between you (*the Serpent, or Satan*) and the woman (*Eve*),
and between your offspring and hers;
he (*the Messiah, her offspring*) will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.”

-Genesis 3:15 (NIV)

And so, we recognize that Isaiah 53 pictures the victory of this Messianic Servant over our enemy, the Devil. As it was prophesied from the beginning, the Devil would temporarily hurt the Messiah in the physical experience of the cross (“you will strike his heel”), but

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the Messiah would crush the Devil's head, ultimately triumphing over him. This, we discover, is how God would overcome the horrific saga of sin entering the creation and polluting humanity, creating a chasm between God and man.

God would come Himself in the Incarnation as a son of Eve to conquer evil by presenting Himself as the perfect atoning sacrifice, that through His death, He would redeem mankind and reestablish relationship between God and man, removing this chasm. But then through His resurrection, He would overcome sin's power of death and ultimately triumph over the Devil – giving to us also the promise of a resurrection!

This is the epic story of the Bible, and it's all captured prophetically in advance, right here in Isaiah. And so, as you can hopefully see from this brief exegetical exploration, Christians are not “misinterpreting” Isaiah 53 at all. Instead, we are correctly understanding its context, not only within the scope of the book itself, but within the larger story of the Bible. And in reality, we're interpreting its Messianic references in a way completely consistent with the traditional ancient Jewish understanding.

Further Establishing the Identity of the Servant

Let's now spend some time further solidifying our understanding of the identity of the Servant mentioned in Isaiah. If our exploration of context thus far still hasn't made it crystal clear, we will continue to explore a number of reasons why this passage absolutely refers to a Messiah person. Let's review several of the primary reasons for this.

First, this passage mentions an individual person. The references are in the singular and the pronouns are clear. Commenting on Isaiah 53:8, Bible scholar Arnold Fruchtenbaum notes...

“This One, who is Messiah, is quite distinct from ‘my people,’ who are Israel.”⁷

In the Old Testament, “my people” is always a reference to Israel.

However, the Messiah will be killed for the sins of Israel.⁸ Israel cannot be stricken for Israel. So, every indication, including simply recognizing the plain reading points to the subject – the Servant of the Lord, or the Arm – as being an individual person. Of course, the scripture includes numerous Messianic titles that are clearly and easily understood as such without the Hebrew word for “Messiah” being explicitly linked to it. Bible scholar Walter Elwell notes...

“While it is true that Isaiah does not explicitly link the title Messiah with the Servant of the Lord, identifying both figures as one and the same person is justifiable.”⁹

Second, even if we were to admit that not all of the references to the servant of the Lord in Isaiah refer directly to the Messiah, that does not mean that **none** of them refer to the Messiah. And even the ones that may not directly refer to the Messiah could still be seen as referring to Him by way of prophetic typology, or by Isaiah himself speaking in the role of the Messianic Servant. As we’ve already shown, as the writer, Isaiah at different points speaks prophetically from several different perspectives. For instance, at times he speaks as himself, at times he speaks in the role of the Servant Messiah, and at times he speaks in the role of the nation of Israel.

In Chapters 40-48, Israel is referred to as God’s servant several times. But they were a **failing** servant, having fallen into idolatry. Like we mentioned previously, the Messianic Servant is even referred to as Israel, in that He acts as the ultimate representative of the nation. He is the archetype.

We also see Cyrus (the Persian King) prophetically anointed as God’s instrument for the overthrow of Babylon (the great source of idolatry). But in Isaiah 42:1-4, the Messiah is clearly introduced as God’s **perfect** Servant. He is the one who, in the times to come, would make a full end of idolatry (which Cyrus did not) and in whose Name the Gentiles would trust. In many ways, Cyrus is even presented as prophetic type of the Messiah, and yet in no way can we conclude that Cyrus was actually the Messiah. This is standard oper-

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ating procedure for prophetic passages in scripture and should not confuse us.

Again, we emphasize that in Chapter 53, the Suffering Servant is consistently presented as an individual and not as a plurality or collective noun, like a people group. For instance, Isaiah 53:8 says, “For the transgressions of My people He was stricken.” The phrase “my people” refers to the people of Israel, so again, Israel cannot be the Suffering Servant. If the people of Israel were the Servant here, who would be “my people”?

Also, the Servant suffers willingly and without objection. The people of Israel have never suffered willingly! According to the scriptures, Israel suffered as a result of sin, not because of her righteousness. Yet, the Servant in Chapter 53 suffered as a righteous person, not because He had sinned. And the Gentiles were never healed because Israel was persecuted (as Isaiah 53:5 would require).

So, while the “servant” language in Isaiah can at times be difficult to understand (as it’s a sort of conversation in which the speaker is constantly changing) we should understand beyond question that the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 is the Messiah – and this Messianic Servant is a theme consistently woven throughout the book, as we showed earlier. No other interpretation will fit.

Third, although some have claimed that it’s difficult to see Jesus as the fulfillment of Verse 10, (“he shall see his seed”) since He didn’t have any physical children, it’s clear that this should be seen in a metaphorical or figurative sense, as we’ve already mentioned. In fact, the New Testament is clear that those who trust in Jesus will become children of God, providing an amazing fulfillment to this verse.

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, **he gave the right to become children of God,**”

-John 1:12 (ESV)

But some have wrongly claimed that the Bible only uses this term “seed” (the Hebrew word *zera* Strong’s #H2233) to refer to literal physical offspring – but never to metaphorical offspring. One of the

best passages that refutes this is Malachi Chapter 2, in which God expresses His desire for a “godly seed” (Verse 15).

We must ask those who claim that “seed” cannot be used metaphorically – “did God ever marry and have physical children?” Of course not, which means that obviously, this text is meant to be understood metaphorically. It should not be difficult then to recognize the figurative interpretation of “seed” to refer to spiritual offspring, or those who the New Testament describes as becoming “sons of God” through the New Covenant.

Fourth, in Verse 2, the figure is said to grow up as “a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground.” The shoot springing up is beyond reasonable doubt a reference to the Messiah, and, in fact, it is a common Messianic reference that can easily be cross-referenced in Isaiah and elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures. For example, Jeremiah 23:5 is another very clear Messianic prophecy, also similarly referring to Him as a “branch.”

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous **Branch**, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.”

-Jeremiah 23:5 (ESV)

And earlier in Isaiah, the Messiah is identified also using this same type of plant imagery.

“There shall come forth a **shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.**”

-Isaiah 11:1 (ESV)

Another example is in Zechariah, in which this “branch” is identified as being a **man** (not a nation). This is a well-known Messianic passage and is one of the passages through which it is understood that the Messiah will build the Temple of God.

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“And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Behold **the man whose name is The Branch**; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord:

Even he shall build the temple of the Lord; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne;”

-Zechariah 6:12-13

The Davidic dynasty was to be cut down in judgment like a felled tree, but it was promised to Israel that a new sprout would shoot up from the stump. The King Messiah was to be that sprout, as all of the ancient rabbis understood.

And fifth, Isaiah 53:10 says, “when you shall make his soul an offering for sin.” The same word for offering (*asham*) is the same word used in the Law where the sacrificial offering had to be perfect and without blemish. Christian scholar Louis Goldberg, who was raised as an Orthodox Jew, comments...

“At this point, if our Jewish friend persists in saying that Isaiah 53 refers to the nation, we can raise the questions, Can you say that Israel is without spot or blemish – perfect in every way? . . . Usually our Jewish friends will say no.”¹⁰

So again, it should be obvious that Israel cannot be sacrificed for Israel, and from an “unblemished” standpoint, could never fit the bill.

And so, although much more can be said on this, we can easily conclude that beyond doubt, the suffering “Servant of the Lord” in Isaiah 53 clearly refers to the Messiah – just as the ancient rabbis concluded. He is the one highly exalted before whom kings shut their mouths. The Messiah is the shoot who sprung up from the fallen Davidic dynasty. He suffered and died to pay for our sins and then rise again. He provided the ultimate atonement. He would serve as a priest to the nations of the world and apply the blood of atonement to cleanse those who believe. There is One alone to whom this can refer – Jesus Christ!

Those who confess Him are His children, His promised offspring,

and inherit the spoils of His victory over sin and death. According to the testimony of the Jewish Apostles who were eyewitnesses, and who all but one lost their lives for their testimony of this truth, Jesus died for our sins, rose again, ascended to the right hand of God, and He now serves as our great High Priest who cleanses us of sin (Hebrew 2:17; 8:1). Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, is the one Isaiah foresaw, and the New Testament bears witness of this beyond competent dispute!

An Analysis of Twelve Additional Jewish Objections

So, we have already handled the main Jewish objection to the Messianic credentials of Jesus Christ – the fallacy that because He didn't fulfill the Conquering King prophecies at His First Coming, He must not be the Messiah. We then addressed the common Jewish claim that the Servant in Isaiah 53 refers to Israel and that Christians who interpret it to mean the Messiah are taking the passage out of context. But as you will see shortly, unbelieving Jews have gone much further than this in their efforts to weaken the Christological connections to this chapter.

In an article on his website entitled, "Isaiah 53: The Forbidden Chapter", theologian R.L. Solberg outlines twelve additional Jewish objections from the text of Isaiah 53, and provides simple Christian responses.¹¹ Let's take a look at these objections, and then note his responses.

Objection #1:

When was Jesus sick? Isaiah 53:3 includes the Hebrew *ish makavot*, which refers to a man who is habitually or chronically ill. Nothing in the New Testament says that Jesus was ever ill.

Solberg's Response:

"Actually, the Hebrew phrase *ish makavot* can refer to habitual pain and suffering as well as sickness. It depends on context. And even the

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Orthodox Jewish Bible translates the phrase in Isaiah 53:3 as ‘acquainted with suffering,’ not ‘habitually sick.’ There is a wealth of scriptural support for Jesus’ fulfillment as a man acquainted with suffering (Matthew 27:27-44; Mark 15:16-32; Luke 23:26-39; 2 Corinthians 1:5; etc.)”

Objection #2:

When did Jesus suffer from leprosy? Isaiah 53:4 includes the word *nagua*, which is a word in the Hebrew scriptures that refers to one who is stricken with leprosy, as we see in 2 Kings 15:5 and Leviticus 13:3, 9, and 20. There is no record in the New Testament that Jesus ever was.

Solberg’s Response:

“The Hebrew word נָגַגַּ (na·gu·a’) means ‘to touch, reach, or strike.’ The word for leprosy is תַּרְרַא (tza·ra’at), and to be struck with leprosy, or to be leprous is מְצֹרָא (me·tzo·ra).”

Objection #3:

When was Jesus “without form or comeliness,” or undesired so that everyone despised or rejected him, as Isaiah 53:3 requires? On the contrary, the gospels insist Jesus was greatly admired everywhere He went by every segment of society (Luke 4:14-15), and even in regions He never visited (Matthew 4:24-25).

Solberg’s Response:

“If Jesus was ‘greatly admired everywhere he went by every segment of society,’ He never would have been crucified! Isaiah 53:3 reads, ‘He was despised and rejected by mankind,’ and the examples of this in the life of Jesus are manifold. Not only was He betrayed, arrested, beaten, flogged, spit upon, mocked, and crucified, He was

despised and rejected in other ways as well (as the New Testament records):

‘And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; and they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff.’ (Luke 4:28-29)

‘But they cried out all together, saying, ‘Away with this man, and release for us Barabbas!’ (Luke 23:18)

‘He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.’ (John 1:11)

‘I have come in My Father’s name, and you do not receive Me.’ (John 5:43)”

Objection #4:

Why wasn’t Jesus humble, as the servant in Isaiah 53:7 was? The Gospels record several instances in which haughty words come from Jesus’ mouth (Luke 19:27, John 6:47, and 14:9). All these verses, and many more, especially in John’s Gospel show that, far from being humble, Jesus thought very highly of himself.

Solberg’s Response:

“Jesus epitomized true humility in that He ‘did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Matthew 20:28). Some of the things He said could undoubtedly be considered ‘haughty’ if they were uttered by a mere mortal. But Jesus was divine. He did not think overly highly of Himself; He thought **soberly** of Himself.

Perhaps His most humble act of all was leaving Heaven to come to earth as a human. Jesus ‘Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by

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becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!’ (Philippians 2:6-8)”

Objection #5:

Why didn’t Jesus remain silent as the servant in Isaiah 53:7 did? All of the Gospels, without exception, record Jesus having much to say during his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. John 18:19-23 and 33-37 relates quite a long defense of himself, intimating he was being rail-roaded and that he was being kidnapped in the dark rather than in the day when his followers might have defended him.

Solberg’s Response:

“The prophecy in Isaiah doesn’t say that Jesus never spoke at all. It says, ‘...he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.’ Is there evidence Jesus fulfilled this passage? Lots...

- ‘But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, ‘I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.’” (Matthew 26:63)
- ‘When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer.’ (Matthew 27:12)
- ‘But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge – to the great amazement of the governor.’ (Matthew 27:14)
- ‘But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, ‘Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?’ (Mark 14:61)
- ‘But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.’ (Mark 15:5)
- ‘He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer.’ (Luke 23:9)
- ‘He went back inside the palace. ‘Where do you come from?’ he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer.’ (John 19:9)”

Objection #6:

Why did Jesus do violence and speak violence, whereas the servant in Isaiah 53:9 “had done no violence”? In Luke 19:45, Jesus fashions a whip to beat the money-changers and animal sacrifice vendors who are in the Temple. But in the Jewish society of that day, striking an animal fit for sacrifice would cause a great loss in value of the animal, so every animal Jesus struck could be considered a separate instance of theft. There goes the claim that Jesus never committed any sins!

Solberg’s Response:

“There are a few things we need to address here. None of the passages that tell of Jesus clearing the Temple courts (Luke 19, John 2, and Mark 1) say He struck or beat the money changers or the animals. They all say he ‘drove them from the Temple courts.’ The Greek word used is ἐκβάλλειν (*ekballein*), which means ‘to expel, to drive, cast or send out.’ Thus, Jesus did no violence, as Isaiah 53:9 prophesied. He never beat, attacked, injured, or physically harmed anyone during His ministry on Earth.

And if we take a broader look at this verse, we find even more compelling evidence that Isaiah 53 is about Jesus. The phrase in 53:9, ‘though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth’ is figurative language that describes an innocent person. Isaiah prophesied that the suffering servant’s execution would be wholly undeserved, which was exactly the case with Jesus. In fact, the apostle Peter quotes directly from Isaiah 53:9, showing us that Jesus was the fulfillment of this prophecy (1 Peter 2:22).

The aspect of innocence in Isaiah’s prophecy is also compelling evidence that Israel could not be the ‘suffering servant’ about whom Isaiah was writing. Israel is not an innocent, unblemished lamb that was killed for the unrighteous. Jesus was.”

Objection #7:

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Why did Jesus deceive people, while the servant in Isaiah 53:9 does not? Jesus was not only a false prophet, but also deceived his disciples by saying he would return in their lifetime. But they all died before Jesus fulfilled his prophecy.

Solberg's Response:

“The author of the claim is likely referring to Matthew 16:28, where Jesus says, ‘Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.’ The author seems to be suggesting that, in this passage, Jesus was referring to His final return. But the scriptural data suggests He was instead referring to His Transfiguration.

This promise from Jesus is described in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Luke, and Mark), and in each case, it is immediately followed by Jesus' Transfiguration. This is where, as Matthew describes it, Jesus led them up a high mountain, and ‘There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus’ (Matthew 17:2-3).

As theologian John MacArthur notes...

‘The word for ‘kingdom’ can be translated ‘royal splendor.’ Therefore, it seems most natural to interpret this promise as a reference to the Transfiguration, which ‘some’ of the disciples – Peter, James, and John – would witness only six days later.’ (*MacArthur Study Bible*)”

Objection #8:

Why was Jesus not buried with the wicked, in accordance with Isaiah 53:9? The Gospels tell us that he only died with some wicked people.

Objection #9:

Why were there no rich people who died with Jesus, in accordance

with Isaiah 53:9? The Gospels tell us that he was buried in the tomb of a rich man, a tomb that had never been used before.

Solberg's Response:

“These two claims can be answered together. They both refer to the first part of Isaiah 53:9, which says, ‘He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death...’

Keeping in mind the genre of prophecy with its use of symbolism and figurative language, this prophecy can be seen as fulfilled by the fact that Jesus was to be executed and buried with criminals until a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, stepped in and offered his tomb (Matthew 27:57; Mark 15:43; Luke 23:51; John 19:38). MacArthur notes...

‘Because of His disgraceful execution alongside criminals, the Jewish leaders intended Jesus to have a disgraceful burial (cf. John 19:31), but instead He was buried with ‘the rich’ in an honorable burial through the donated tomb of rich Joseph of Arimathea.’ (*MacArthur Study Bible*)

This passage is more evidence that the servant referred to in chapter 53 does not seem to be Israel, since Israel has not been (a.) assigned a grave with the wicked, (b.) put to death, or (c.) buried with the rich. Though it must be granted that these could conceivably be interpreted as prophecies of still-future events for the nation.”

Objection #10:

Why didn't Jesus have children, in accordance with Isaiah 53:10?

Objection #11:

When were Jesus' days lengthened, in accordance with Isaiah 53:10? On the contrary, the Gospels tell us that Jesus died in the middle of an average lifespan (in his thirties).

Objection #12:

We're told Jesus was the son of God, but how can God's days be lengthened?

Solberg's Response:

“These final three claims can be answered together as well. They all refer to the second half of Isaiah 53:10 which says, ‘he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.’

First, the author of this claim is interpreting the passage above as referring to literal offspring. However, given the genre of prophecy with its use of symbolism and figurative language, a literal interpretation is not required – especially in light of the totality of the prophecies about the Messiah found throughout the book of Isaiah.

Christians see the fulfillment of this prophecy in the idea that offspring refers to the Servant's spiritual progeny, the generations who would become children of God through faith in Jesus. ‘Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God’ (John 1:12).

Second, the phrase ‘prolong his days’ finds fulfillment in Christ's resurrection from the dead. It speaks to His time on earth which ended with His resurrection and ascension to God's right hand. God's days weren't literally lengthened, of course, because He is eternal. This, again, is the figurative language of prophecy.”

So, through Solberg's excellent responses, we can see that none of these objections are valid when subjected to even a tiny bit of scrutiny. Consequently, we can be assured of the dependability of the understanding of the Servant presented in this study. Without a doubt, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 was the Lord Jesus Christ, as anticipated

hundreds of years beforehand in the incredible prophetic writings given to Isaiah.

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2. -Glaser, p. 123.
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CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the details within the prophecies of Isaiah 53 fit so precisely with the experiences and accomplishments of Jesus Christ that no other figure in history can even be seriously considered. The New Testament writers often referred to Isaiah 53 and other prophecies within Isaiah to support their conclusions that Jesus was the Messiah. The things they observed – the incredible fulfillments that they were eyewitness to – made it so clear to them that this man Jesus was the prophesied Suffering Servant Messiah, that they were willing to go to their deaths for that conviction. Still today, those who consider the words of this prophecy – written over six hundred years before its fulfillment in Jesus Christ – find compelling evidence that He is the Messiah of Israel and only through Him can we receive salvation and be reconciled to God.

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