

THE REAL "SUFFERING SERVANT": DECODING A CONTROVERSIAL PASSAGE IN THE BIBLE

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The most controversial passage in the Hebrew Bible is, arguably, Isaiah 53:1-7. For centuries, Jews and Christians have been debating the meaning of the so-called "Suffering Servant" described in these verses. A quick search of material on Internet sites reveals impassioned claims by various Christians who fervently believe the Servant in question is Jesus, and equally fervent counterclaims by Jews who believe that the Servant is the Jewish people. As a prophet, the Christian argument goes, Isaiah foresaw the future coming of the Christian messiah who "carried our affliction" and "in his bruises we were healed" (Isa. 53:4-5). References to this text are made in the New Testament, asserting the claim that Isaiah in Chapter 53 prophesied the suffering of Jesus (see John 12:38, and Romans 10:16). Not so, runs the Jewish argument. The prophet makes it clear he is not speaking about future events. Rather, he is repeating an ancient Jewish belief, according to which God's servant is Jacob and, by extension, his descendants, the people of Israel. The implication of the Jewish argument is that the Jews suffer because of the misconduct of the world, and their suffering has a redeeming power for humankind. This may have been true prior to the time of Jesus, Christians might concede, but it is the death of Jesus on the cross that replaces the old Covenant and grants redemption to all people for all time.

In centuries past, this kind of polemic often resulted in violence, and many Jews suffered for it and even paid with their lives. Thankfully, this is no longer the case, and it is to be hoped that it is a thing of the past. Nevertheless, passions still run high over the question of the Suffering Servant, and the old animus of the polemic still rears its head, as was recently seen in Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ*, considered by many to be anti-Semitic. One thing, however, is clear. Both sides cannot be right. Clearly, Isaiah had someone in mind, but we are not told who that someone is. In fact, what we have here is a tangle of issues that has never been resolved by

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biblical scholars. We are facing here, to paraphrase Winston Churchill's famous phrase about the Soviet Union, a riddle wrapped up in an enigma. To be able to resolve the identity of the Suffering Servant we need to make a bold attempt to shed some light on both the riddle and the enigma; namely, the identity of the author of the text, his time and place, and the wider context of the preceding historical events and their consequence.

To begin with, Isaiah in Chapter 53 is not the Isaiah after whom the book is named. He is not the Isaiah of Chapters 1 through 39, who talks about world peace at the *end of days*, or tells us that *the young woman* [traditionally translated in Christian Bibles as the "virgin"] *is with child*. Jewish interpretations of the Book of Isaiah have struggled for the past 2,000 years with the question of the identity of the author or authors of the second half of the book, that begins with Chapter 40. For one thing, it is quite clear that the second half refers to events around the time of the return from the Babylonian Exile, more than two centuries after the time of Isaiah. An early example (around the second century C.E.) of the awareness of an author different from the original one is found in the Talmud in a discussion of the order and authorship of the books of the Bible, in which Isaiah is placed after Jeremiah and Ezekiel (Bava Batra 14b). The sages, however, are not comfortable with this arrangement and engage in a discussion trying to solve this discrepancy.

The question comes into sharper focus in the work of medieval Jewish commentators. A century ago, Thomas Kelly Cheyne wrote: "Two eminent Jewish rabbis, Abraham Ibn Ezra and Isaac Abravanel, were the first who showed a tendency to disintegrate the Book of Isaiah, but their subtle suggestion had no consequences."¹ Actually, they were preceded by Ibn Gikatilla, who is mentioned by Ibn Ezra in his commentary on Isaiah 40:1. In this context the two clearly point to two Isaiahs. Further allusions to the issue appear in the work of Rambam, who, at the end of his discussion of the yearly cycle of prayers, refers to the "prayers of consolation of Isaiah" as though it were a later unit of the book,² and also in Ramban.³

The ambiguity of this issue does not end even in modern times. In his introduction to his commentary on Isaiah, Israel Slotki asserts the existence of three Isaiahs.⁴ To this day, opinions differ on the issue of the authorship of the second half of the book. There is now, however, a general consensus

among most Jewish and non-Jewish biblical scholars that the second half represents the work of a Second Isaiah, often referred to as Deutero-Isaiah.

The Second Isaiah provides no biographical data whatsoever about himself, not even a name. We may as well refer to him as the Bible's Mystery Prophet. Small wonder he is so open to different interpretations. We do know, however, that along with the original Isaiah and with Jeremiah and Ezekiel, he is one of the giants of biblical prophecy. His words have had an enormous impact on Judaism, and perhaps an even greater impact on Christianity. We also know that he lived at a time when the Kingdom of Judah had come to an end with the destruction of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Davidic monarchy, yet he witnessed an event then unique in human history, namely, the return of the Judean exiles from Babylonian captivity and the rebirth of the Jewish people.

He begins his prophetic message with words of consolation to the returning remnants: *Be comforted, be comforted my people, your God proclaims* (40:1). The returning exiles were facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Their land was now occupied by a neighboring people, and as they proceeded to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, they encountered armed resistance. They needed renewed faith to pursue their task, and this mysterious prophet provided that faith. In ecstatic exhortations, he kept reminding his people they had nothing to fear, for the one true God was on their side. Empires rose and fell, but their Covenant with the God of the universe was eternal.

The Second Isaiah lived at a time when Judaism reinvented itself. During the monarchic period, which lasted for about five centuries, the prophets of Israel, from Samuel through Jeremiah, failed to wean their people away from pagan practices and immorality. They were not able to establish the supremacy of the God of Israel. The end result of Israel's spiritual and moral waywardness was the destruction of the First Temple and the Exile. It was, however, the last prophet of the monarchic period, namely Jeremiah, who planted the seeds that enabled the returning exiles to do away with pagan beliefs and become a *kingdom of priests and a holy people* (Ex. 19:6). The returning exiles were believing Jews. They were no longer the Israelites and Judeans of old, a tribal people steeped in syncretism. Their encounter with the gods of Babylon and Persia did

not turn them into pagans. On the contrary, it helped them assimilate the

teachings of their prophets and become people of faith. The extent to which this transformation was mainly due to the teachings of Jeremiah has never been fully explored. But herein lies the key to the question: Who, after all, is the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53?

It appears that the Second Isaiah knew the answer, but as with his own identity, it was kept a secret. It also appears that someone else at a later date knew the Servant's identity. To find the answer, we need to turn to the Book of Jeremiah. A better understanding of Jeremiah is essential to understanding the Second Isaiah and his mysterious Servant, and the method available to us is a textual and linguistic analysis of the words of those two prophets.

That Jeremiah has a great deal to do with the Suffering Servant is something that was observed at least as early as the tenth century by Saadia Gaon, the great philosopher and exegete. According to Ibn Ezra, in his commentary on Isaiah 52:13, Saadia identified the Servant with Jeremiah, an interpretation that Ibn Ezra (12th century) concurred with: "The Gaon, Rav Saadia, his memory be blessed, interpreted the whole chapter as referring to Jeremiah, and well he interpreted." But Saadia's view was rejected in his own lifetime, particularly by his Karaite adversaries, who contended that he had lost his senses. (The Karaites, a Jewish sect that still exists today, were strict literalists when it came to biblical interpretation, rejecting rabbinical interpretations and innovations.) Sheldon Blank, a 20th-century Jewish biblical scholar who has written books about both Jeremiah and Isaiah, rejects the view that the Servant is Jeremiah. Blank writes:

The bitter experience of Israel, whom the Second Isaiah here personified as servant-prophet, led him necessarily to Jeremiah for the features of his personification – to that prophet within his tradition who, more than any other, had, like Israel, endured reproach and suffering. Inevitably, Jeremiah must sit as model for his portrait of God's servant-prophet. This is not to say that the servant and Jeremiah are to be identified.⁵

R.E.O. White, a Christian contemporary of Blank who also wrote a book about Jeremiah, has this to say about the identity of the Servant:

So Isaiah sketches his portrait of the coming Servant of the Lord who should save Israel, and in that portrait Jesus himself saw his own lineaments and destiny prefigured. But of whom was Isaiah

thinking when he asked his questions? With Jeremiah's story in mind, we may reverently wonder if the words do not describe his experience with astonishing accuracy. And reverent surmise becomes moral certainty when we hear Isaiah at once quote Jeremiah's words about himself: "But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter. I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying, . . . 'Let us cut him off from the land of the living'" (Jer. 11:19; cf. Isa. 53:7-8).⁶

What makes these two quotes from two contemporary biblical scholars so telling is that even though they both sense the strong presence of Jeremiah in Isaiah 53, they are wedded to their traditional views of the Servant being the Jewish people (for Blank), and Jesus (for White). Neither one of them goes far enough in analyzing these difficult verses in which the Mystery Prophet embedded a unique message, left for future generations to be deciphered. (This reminds us of some of El Greco's large canvasses, in which the artist painted miniatures in the folds of the robes of the prelates and the saints, expressing his true artistic feelings.) This message amounts to a capsule biography of Jeremiah, who is indeed the Servant in these verses: *Who can believe what we have heard? And on whom was Adonai's power revealed?*(Isa. 53:1).

The story of Jeremiah is absolutely amazing. Jeremiah lived during the last years of the Judean monarchy. He foresaw the coming destruction of Jerusalem, and spent his years as a solitary voice calling his people to turn back from their evil ways. He was scorned and ridiculed, and on several occasions he came within a hair's-breadth of losing his life. It was only after the fall of Judah that the exiles in Babylon began to realize that his was the voice of God. For a while his story was unknown in Babylon, but when the Second Isaiah first heard it he was amazed to learn what Jeremiah had gone through, and how God chose such an afflicted person as his messenger. Indeed, Jeremiah should be credited for saving Judaism. He did much more than prophecy doom. With the help of the scribe Baruch ben-Neriah, he began the process of preserving the Law and transitioning Judaism from a religion centered around Temple sacrifices to a faith based on Torah, prayer and ethical behavior. In this respect, Jeremiah may be

considered the first Jew, while Abraham is the first Hebrew. In comparing the language of Isaiah 53 to Jeremiah's, it is clear that this Mystery Prophet was a disciple of Jeremiah, in whom he saw the savior of Judaism. Jeremiah to him becomes the prophet *par excellence*, the true servant of God. As the pivotal prophet in the Bible, Jeremiah comes to embody for the Second Isaiah the entire Jewish people, and so the Servant becomes interchangeably Jeremiah and the Jewish people. Why Second Isaiah does not come out and identify Jeremiah by name will be discussed later on.

He rose like a newborn baby before Him, And like a tree trunk in an arid land (53:2).

This is a direct biographical reference to Jeremiah. We are told in Jeremiah 1 that God chose Jeremiah at his birth. We are further told that when God first appears to Jeremiah, the young boy is looking at a blossoming almond tree. The boy is overwhelmed by his first contact with the Divine, and when he rises and watches the tree in full blossom, the voice of God becomes his. He is told not to fear, for he will be made strong against his adversaries. The two words "*arid land*" are borrowed from the next episode in the Book of Jeremiah (2:6), where the prophet reminds his people of the wandering through the desert: *Who leads us . . . through arid land.*

He had no rank and was given no respect, We did not find anything attractive about him (53:2).

Jeremiah was born a priest but gave up his priestly rank. He was not an official prophet of the court until the very end, when a desperate King Zedekiah began to consult him without actually engaging him as a court priest. Jeremiah's contemporaries showed him no respect. At best, he was tolerated. A man of constant sorrow, he made few friends and had little influence over his contemporaries, who were too far gone in their idolatry and immorality to understand his message.

He was despised, shunned by all, A great sufferer, greatly afflicted (53:3).

Jeremiah was the most afflicted prophet in the Hebrew Bible. He foresaw the destruction of Jerusalem years before it happened, and mourned it for

many years. The Judeans, particularly in Jerusalem, despised him, for he disturbed their complacency and smugness. (God was on their side, they argued, and no harm would come to them.)

He seemed to hide from us, Despised, we took no account of him (53:3).

Hiding is a running theme in Jeremiah's life. After he prophesies at the Temple, the priests try to put him to death. He is banned from the public and goes into hiding. Later, after King Jehoiakim throws Jeremiah's scroll of prophecies into the fire, he has to go into hiding again to save his life.

Indeed, he carried our affliction, And he suffered our pain (53:4).

No other prophet in the Bible suffers the pain of his people more vividly than does Jeremiah. When the Temple is destroyed and the people are exiled, Jeremiah takes on the suffering of his people and, according to rabbinic tradition, authors the Book of Lamentations, Judaism's official lament for the destruction of the Temple.

And we thought him diseased, God stricken, tortured (53:4).

When Jeremiah parades in the streets of Jerusalem in a soiled and soggy loincloth, or with iron bars around his neck, he certainly does not convey the image of a happy and level-headed person. He is repeatedly scorned by his listeners, and rather than see him as God's messenger, they regard him as a misguided and tortured soul.

But he was stricken because of our sins (53:5).

God indeed makes Jeremiah carry the burden of the sins of his generation.

*Oppressed because of our iniquities,
The lesson of our welfare is upon him (53:5).*

The life of Jeremiah and his teaching were an object lesson for his generation. That they recovered their national welfare was because of him and the legacy he bequeathed them, namely, the Torah and prophetic teachings he helped preserve for them with the help of his scribe, Baruch ben-Neriah.

And in his bruises we were healed. We all went astray like sheep (53:5-6).

When Jeremiah is flogged, or when he is lowered into the mud pit, he emerges full of bruises. But he is doing it for the sake of his people, who went astray and did not see the impending doom.

Each going our own way, And God visited upon him the guilt of us all (53:6).

The people were divided during the time of the siege of Jerusalem, and Jeremiah had to live through that time of national divisiveness and bear its consequences. This continued during the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, and after the assassination of Gedaliah, whom they had appointed governor.

*He was attacked, yet he remained submissive, He did not open his mouth
(53:7)*

When the priests in the Holy Temple try to pass a death sentence on Jeremiah, he humbly accepts his fate, and is only saved by the last-minute intercession of a highly-placed friend.

*He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
Silent like a ewe about to be sheared (53:7).*

Here we have Jeremiah's own words being quoted: *But I was like a gentle sheep led to the slaughter* (Jer. 11:19).

To the Second Isaiah, Jeremiah came to symbolize the Suffering Servant, whom God chose to help save His covenanted people. In a broader sense, the Servant is the Jewish people as a whole. Why, then, does the author fail to identify Jeremiah by name?

To begin with, the Second Isaiah does not identify anyone by name, not even himself. He remains the Mystery Prophet throughout. But it should be clear by now that he knew Jeremiah quite well, and was greatly influenced by him. Furthermore, since his prophecies were inserted into an already-existing book, namely, the Book of Isaiah, it is clear that other hands were involved in the compilation of the book as we know it. (It is a rather ancient compilation, dating back before the Common Era, as evidenced by the Isaiah scroll found among the Dead Sea Scrolls.) We need to ask ourselves: What were the circumstances under which this text was written and compiled, and how did

they affect the presentation of the Servant concept, so clearly depicting none other than Jeremiah?

We are now in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the leaders of the exiles who return from Babylonia. The *she'erit ha'pleyta* – the saving remnant of the Jewish people – is reinventing itself. They acknowledge Jeremiah as the one who predicted the return (Ezra 1:1), but they are now guided by the *Torah of Moses the man of God* (3:2) In other words, the primacy of Moses as the lawgiver is acknowledged, while the contribution of Jeremiah, who played a pivotal role in making Judaism Torah-centered rather than Temple-cult-centered, is played down. Jeremiah, who lived only 70 years earlier, was a real person to the returning exiles, while Moses was a distant figure who confirmed the antiquity and legitimacy of the Law. A lofty concept such as God's Suffering Servant was not to be made contemporary but was rather left timeless.

Finally, let us take a look at the Christian claim to the Suffering Servant. That the Second Isaiah meant to foreshadow the career of Jesus by describing the life of Jeremiah is a matter of belief, not of historical fact. The more accurate assessment, as White has indicated, is that Jesus himself modeled his life after the life of Jeremiah. Reading the Gospels as a Jew, I cannot help but be amazed at how much Jesus was influenced by Jeremiah. They lived at a similar time – Jeremiah during the time leading up to the destruction of the First Temple, and Jesus during the years preceding the fall of the Second Temple. Jesus sees himself as a latter-day Jeremiah. He is out to save his people who will soon lose their sovereignty. That he ends up saving Gentiles instead of Jews is another matter. A careful reading of the Gospels shows that Jesus planned his martyrdom with Jeremiah in mind, using Isaiah Chapter 53 – which he knew full well was about Jeremiah – as his guide. And the way he kept planning everything that was about to happen to him, step by step, day by day, as he does, for example, in the story of the Last Supper and its aftermath, is a clear indication that he used a guide. Here was a man of rare qualities, who took his destiny into his own hands and played it out as a role model for future generations, much the way Jeremiah did. Both were aware of the fact that they were sacrificing their life for posterity, since, in both instances, the die had already been cast for their generation.

The Hebrew Bible ends with the words: *In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, that the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah might be fulfilled . . .* (II Chron. 36:22). Is it an accident that the Bible concludes with Jeremiah as God's

spokesperson, indeed, God's Servant *par excellence*? Neither Jews nor Christians should find this odd.

NOTES

1. *Jewish Encyclopedia*, Vol. 6 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1906) p. 641.
2. Rambam, *Sefer Ahava* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1959) p. 356.
3. Ramban alludes to it in his *Sefer HaGeulah* Part I, pp. 269-270.
4. *Isaiah* (London: Soncino Press, 1949) p. x.
5. Sheldon Blank, *Prophetic Faith in Isaiah* (New York: Harper, 1958) p. 100.
6. R. E. O. White, *The Indomitable Prophet: A Biographical Commentary on Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999) p. 13.

ADDENDUM

A linguistic analysis of Isaiah 53:1-7 reveals that the language of Second Isaiah draws heavily on the words, phrases and verbal images typical of, or even unique to, Jeremiah. Examples:

Shoresh [root] - see Jer. 12:2, 17:8. Both Second Isaiah and Jeremiah talk about the rootedness of a person.

Eretz tziyah [arid land] - see Jer. 2:16. The arid land is where both the Israelites and the "Suffering Servant" come from.

Nivzeh [despised] - see Jer. 22:28. Refers to the low state of a person. In Second-Isaiah it is the Servant; in Jeremiah it is King Jehoiachin after he is exiled to Babylon.

Mastir panim [hides his face] - see Jer. 33:5; also 37:17, 38:16, 40:15. The theme of hiding and specifically of God hiding His face is common to both prophets.

Musar [lesson] - see Jer. 2:30, 5:3, 7:28, 17:23, 32:33, 35:13. This term is typical in Jeremiah.

Shlomeynu [our welfare] - see Jer. 29:7. Jeremiah tells the exiles in Babylon to pray for the welfare of Babylon, and by doing so, as the Second-Isaiah points out, he ensured the welfare of his own people.

Ka'tzon ta'inu [we were lost like sheep] - see Jer. 50:6. Jeremiah often compares his people to sheep and cattle (11:19; 34:18; 50:17).

Seh la'tevach [lamb to the slaughter] - see Jer. 11:19. Refers to Jeremiah's passive attitude when confronting a possible execution.

The Suffering Servant. "Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted". He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. God would have to establish His kingdom His blessed presence would have to break into history, removing the transgressions that kept His people from seeing His face and guaranteeing their heavenly citizenship forever. Only by a sovereign work could this kingdom be established (52:3-6, 10). Moreover, since the Lord's kingdom and the Davidic kingdom were to be one and the same as an eternal kingdom (2 Sam. 7:1-17; Ps. 110), this kingdom could come only through the Son of David. The real "Suffering servant": Decoding a controversial passage in the bible. Mordecai schreiber. The most controversial passage in the Hebrew Bible is, arguably, Isaiah 53:1-7. For centuries, Jews and Christians have been debating the meaning of the so-called "Suffering Servant" described in these verses. References to this text are made in the New Testament, asserting the claim that Isaiah in Chapter 53 prophesied the suffering of Jesus (see John 12:38, and Romans 10:16). Not so, runs the Jewish argument. The prophet makes it clear he is not speaking about future events. Rather, he is repeating an ancient Jewish belief, according to which God's servant is Jacob and, by extension, his descendants, the people of Israel. Read the Bible. Reading Plans. Advanced Search. The Suffering Servant. 53 (A)Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? 2 For He grew up before Him like a (B)tender [a]shoot, And like a root out of dry ground; He has (C)no stately form or majesty That we would look at Him, Nor an appearance that we would take pleasure in Him. 3 He was (D)despised and abandoned by men, A man of [b]great pain and (E)familiar with sickness; And like one from whom people hide their faces, He was (F)despised, and we had no (G)regard for Him.

The real "Suffering servant": Decoding a controversial passage in the bible. Mordecai schreiber. The most controversial passage in the Hebrew Bible is, arguably, Isaiah 53:1-7. For centuries, Jews and Christians have been debating the meaning of the so-called "Suffering Servant" described in these verses. References to this text are made in the New Testament, asserting the claim that Isaiah in Chapter 53 prophesied the suffering of Jesus (see John 12:38, and Romans 10:16). Not so, runs the Jewish argument. The prophet makes it clear he is not speaking about future events. Rather, he is repeating an ancient Jewish belief, according to which God's servant is Jacob and, by extension, his descendants, the people of Israel. In these passages, God promises to choose a servant who will teach his true way to the nations. Bruce Feiler says in *Where God Was Born*, that in some verses the servant appears to be a person, in others a group, in some a real figure and in others imaginary. The only time the "servant" is named, the reference is to Israel. The Suffering Servant is one of the titles given to the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah chapters 40-55. These are the "servant songs". The Bible is primarily a recounting of a particular God (Yahweh) and His actions in the world and in the lives of people over many centuries, and not so much a science guide or astronomy reference, so other than a handful of references here and there, nothing about particular things in the sky are discussed. Mordecai Schreiber writes of the long-standing disagreement over this passage between Jews and Christians ("THE REAL "SUFFERING SERVANT": DECODING A CONTROVERSIAL PASSAGE IN THE BIBLE"): http://jbnqnew.jewishbible.org/assets/Uploads/371/371_sufferingservant.pdf The most controversial passage in the Hebrew Bible is, arguably, Isaiah 53:1-7. For centuries, Jews and Christians have been debating the meaning of the so-called "Suffering Servant" described in these verses. A quick search of material on Internet sites reveals impassioned claims by various Christians who fervently believe the Servant in question is Jesus, and equally fervent counterclaims by Jews who believe that the Servant is the Jewish people. The Servant will have been wise in life so that in the final analysis He prospers with God. I should think that the context of this verse would be looking at the final aspect "prosper" or "be successful". The word needs some study, but given the many words and ideas in this passage that need study, I would not spend a great amount of time on it. 14 Like as many were astonished at you. (his visage was so marred more than any other man, and his form more than the sons of man), The verse requires no special attention, which is good because the passage has much that does. The parenthesis offers a nice parallelism to underscore how the suffering disfigured him. 15 so shall he startle many nations. kings shall shut their mouths at him