

BELIEVING IN YESHUA THE MESSIANIC WAY

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A central theme of the Bible is the calling of Messiah—the set apart “anointed one” to carry out God’s plan for this world. His identity, while well-established in Christianity and among Messianic believers today, has remained uncertain within the Jewish community. False Messiahs have come and gone over the history of Israel. But for many Jewish people today, it is actually not a question of *who*, but *what* is the Messiah? This is especially true for Jews from the Reform branch of Judaism who do not read the Bible in its plain sense. It is more common today for Messianic passages of Scripture to be read allegorically, so that the Messiah represents not an actual person, but a future Messianic age of peace and harmony arising on the earth. It is a form of social evolution in which civilization learns its lessons from the past and makes improvements leading to prosperity and perfect harmony, dissolving all hostilities, symbolized by the words from Isaiah: “the wolf will dwell with the lamb” (Isa 11:6).

That optimism is reflected in the great emphasis within Jewish society today on becoming involved in social causes of every sort, from civil rights movements, to humanitarian programs and professional services contributing to the health and welfare of other people. That optimism is noble and does contribute greatly to the well-being of the world.

But is there any reason to believe that this world overall is actually getting better? Are there signs that people are learning to set aside their hostilities toward each other? And is it sensible to assume that humanity will always be able to maintain peace and harmony perfectly without ever being broken? As recent history has shown, it does not take many hateful people to disrupt the entire world. Reality indicates that such a paradise on earth is not just elusive, but impossible to preserve in perpetuity as Isaiah depicts. That is the great flaw of this way of interpretation being promoted today in Judaism.

That has not always been the case, however. In biblical times the Jewish people interpreted the passage in Isaiah 11 plainly, and understood that Isaiah was depicting a person—the Messiah—who will bring about lasting peace through the life-changing power of God:

“Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of Adonai will rest on Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of Adonai. And He will delight in the fear of Adonai, and He will not judge by what His eyes see, nor make a decision by what His ears hear” (Isa 11:1-3).

Here the prophet shows that the Messiah will be like a shoot or a twig that arises from a particular stem or main branch of Israel, namely that of Jesse, or the royal line of kings. He will have great spiritual character that will enable him to rule over a restored kingdom of Israel, with Jewish people being regathered from all over the world (Isa 11:11-13). It will indeed be a time marked by lasting peace, not because of mankind improving itself, but because of God changing

people inwardly.

The greater context of Scripture shows that Yeshua (Jesus) is indeed the “shoot from the stem of Jesse” (Mat 1:6; Rom 15:12) and when we believe in Him and make Him Lord over our lives, we become a “new creature” as Paul writes (2 Cor 5:17) and “born again” as Yeshua teaches (Jn 3:3). Our inner nature that is prone to sin is transformed into one that is redeemed and given the power to live righteously and by faith. That transformation will be perfected one day when we dwell in the Lord’s presence in an everlasting manner. Thus the full counsel of God’s Word shows that Isaiah was describing the culmination of the life-changing ministry of the Messiah whose “resting place will be glorious” (11:10).

Unlike today’s Jewish community, the Jewish people in second temple times believed in a literal Messianic kingdom and were looking for a man known as the Messiah who would bring Isaiah’s vision to pass. That anticipation was reflected in many ways, including an expectation that Yeshua would establish the restored kingdom of Israel in their day.

But when it became clear that Yeshua would not lead a revolt against Rome and establish the kingdom in their day, most people, especially those known as the zealots, rejected Him. The great error they made was failing to acknowledge another portrait of the Messiah in the *Tanakh* (Old Testament). He would first have to suffer to the point of death and then be resurrected before He ruled this world in righteousness and faithfulness. That is the message Isaiah brings out in his 53rd chapter.

In biblical times, people who were knowledgeable in the Scriptures did in fact understand that the Messiah would suffer to the point of death. This is reflected in the writings of the *Targums*, which were expanded translations of the Hebrew words of the Old Testament into the language of Aramaic that was commonly spoken by Jews after the Babylonian captivity. Written during the intertestamental period before Yeshua, the *Targums* reflected what was widely believed by Jews who knew the Scriptures, and, in the case of Isaiah 53, they were convinced that the subject was the man known as the Messiah (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan Isaiah 52:13*).

That belief persisted for another thousand years until the Middle Ages. Then in the 11th century the influential rabbi known as Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki) put forth the idea that the Servant of Isaiah 53 was not the Messiah, but referred to the nation of Israel. In his way of thinking, the suffering detailed in this chapter describes the historical suffering of the nation.

Why do you suppose he came up with that idea for the very first time 1700 years after Isaiah wrote the prophecy? It seems likely that Rashi did not like the Messianic understanding of the passage that had prospered because of Christianity. His position then took root in Judaism and was developed further by another rabbi of the Middle Ages, Ibn Ezra, and that belief has prevailed until this present day. So now you will find virtually no one in traditional Judaism who teaches that Isaiah 53 refers to the Messiah, and instead holds that it is about the sufferings of Israel.

Clearly there is a disconnection in understanding between the present and the past of Judaism. It is only within Christianity or Messianic belief that the understanding remains consistent all the way back 2700 years to Isaiah. This disparity calls for a critical evaluation of the two positions.

Who fits the description of Isaiah 53?

Verse	The servant....	Israel	Yeshua
52:13	<p style="text-align: center;">will prosper</p> <p>The word translated as prosper is שָׁכַל (<i>sakal</i>), which has the sense of being successful because you are wise. It is often used to describe the actions of kings. And it is reflected in another unquestionably Messianic prophecy in Jeremiah 23:5 when God said:</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">“I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land.</p> <p>It can be said that the nation of Israel had a measure of success over the years, but never completely so, because its history is marked by idolatry, exile and the failure to recognize the coming of the actual Messiah. But Yeshua was completely successful in His calling by bringing salvation to the world.</p>	?	√
52:14	<p style="text-align: center;">has a marred appearance</p> <p>One need only consider the horrific images from the Holocaust and the description of Yeshua while being crucified to acknowledge that this depiction by Isaiah could apply to both subjects.</p>	√	√
52:15	<p style="text-align: center;">sprinkled the nations</p> <p>The word translated as “sprinkle” is נָזַח (<i>nazah</i>). It is used 21 times in the Torah, every one of which refers to priests sprinkling sacrificial blood, including the high priest on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16). Since there are no exceptions to the rule, a proper use of the term regarding sprinkling by the Servant indicates that he carries out a sacrificial atoning work. Only in this case, the benefit goes to the nations of the world in covering their sins, not just the people of Israel. The nation of Israel never completed an act of atonement for the nations of the world. But Yeshua did (Mat 20:28; 1 Cor 5:21).</p>		√
53:1	<p style="text-align: center;">his message was not believed by everyone</p> <p>We can see how this verse applies to Israel since not many people have believed their message throughout history. It also applies to Yeshua, for in spite of the faithful remnant that believed in Him, the great majority of people in His day did not.</p>	√	√

2	<p style="text-align: center;">had no attractive appearance</p> <p>Our world always esteems the beautiful and the glamorous. That was also part of the history of Israel when they desired the very handsome Saul for their king. But God said through Isaiah that people would be attracted to Messiah’s physical attributes. In spite of the flattering portraits that have been done of Yeshua by artists down through the ages, He was never described in the Bible as being physically attractive. The same cannot be said about Israel since their temple in Jerusalem was one of the most beautiful structures in the world.</p>		√
3	<p style="text-align: center;">was despised and forsaken by men</p> <p>You might also say that national Israel has been despised and forsaken by men. But it would make better sense if Isaiah had used the plural pronouns “they” and “them” for a nation instead of the singular “he” and “him” for a man.</p> <p>Yeshua did not match the expectations of the zealots seeking a powerful revolutionary or the religious leaders who sought a Messiah who would agree with their burdensome teachings. Because Yeshua wasn’t what either group wanted, they despised and forsook Him.</p>	?	√
4	<p style="text-align: center;">bore our griefs and sorrows, but people at that time considered him to be punished by God</p> <p>Israel never bore the griefs and sorrows of anyone else. What makes this such a perfect match for Yeshua is that not only did He take upon Himself the griefs and sorrows of others, but the people who witnessed His suffering on the cross thought He was being punished by God because they assumed He had sinned, when in reality He was paying the price for <i>their</i> sins.</p>		√
5	<p style="text-align: center;">was pierced through for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, bringing us healing through his punishment</p> <p>The Hebrew word חָלַל (<i>chalal</i>), meaning “pierced” is an accurate description of the wounds suffered by crucifixion. Remember, Isaiah gave this prophecy long before the Romans introduced that practice. And again notice how it is a painful and violent punishment that is done for <i>our</i> sins, not His. So while that describes Yeshua perfectly, neither of these details apply to Israel as a nation.</p>		√
6	<p style="text-align: center;">Adonai caused <i>our</i> iniquity to fall on Him</p> <p>Again, for the same reasons shown above, this description applies to Yeshua alone.</p>		√

7	<p style="text-align: center;">like a lamb led to slaughter, He did not open His mouth</p> <p>Some Jewish writers have said this verse describes what happened to the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust. But they were not entirely silent and formed resistance movements that fought back. So it only partially applies to their experience. But it completely describes how Yeshua responded to those who persecuted Him to the point of death.</p>	?	√
8	<p style="text-align: center;">was judged, taken away, and cut off from life, not because of his own transgression, but because of the transgression of people</p> <p>Being “cut off” is a Hebrew phrase used to describe death. In Genesis 9 it refers to the people being cut off from the ark during the Flood, resulting in their death. It is used throughout the Torah to describe the death penalty and in Daniel 9:26 referring to the death of Messiah.</p> <p>Again it has been argued that the Jews of Europe were judged, taken away and killed. And the same is true for Yeshua. But He alone did it while being sinless and for the atoning benefit of other sinful people.</p>		√
9	<p style="text-align: center;">was assigned to the grave with wicked men, yet buried with a rich man</p> <p>This verse has no connection to Israel. But it does make sense for Yeshua who was to be buried along with the two criminals that were crucified on either side of Him. Yet He ended up being buried in a rich man’s tomb when Joseph of Arimathea donated his own burial place.</p>		√
10	<p style="text-align: center;">was made a guilt offering (sacrifice) by Adonai, yet he will still see His offspring and prolong his days, and will prosper once again</p> <p>The Servant’s death is characterized as a guilt offering, which was a Levitical sacrifice that involved restitution to someone who had been wronged (Lev 5:16). That does not describe Israel’s history at all.</p> <p>This verse applies to Yeshua in every aspect.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As a true guilt offering, He paid the price for our sins that are offensive to God’s holiness. • His sacrificial death was within God’s will. As God dwelling among humanity, He said about His life in John 10:18 - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again.” • Moreover, He was able to overcome death and to prolong His days, thus enabling Him to see His spiritual descendants and to prosper or be successful in a mighty way. 		√

11	<p>his suffering will be sufficient and will bring justification to many people because He will bear their iniquities</p> <p>Once again, Israel never bore the iniquities or sins of other people, so they could never make other people righteous before God. But Yeshua accomplished that through His atoning death on the cross.</p>		√
12	<p>poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors, bearing their sin, and interceded for them</p> <p>Just to make sure that the sacrificial nature of the prophecy is clear, Isaiah says for the fifth time that the death of the Servant is for the purpose of bearing the sins of people. Only Yeshua, and never Israel, did that for the people of this world. And, in so doing, He intercedes for us.</p>		√

There is no one who ever walked this earth who meets the description of Isaiah 53, except Yeshua. And the same is true for all of the other Messianic passages of Scripture. Together they show a portrait of the Messiah who suffers and dies in an act of atonement for sins of other people, then overcomes death and returns again to complete His calling as the one who reigns over a world that is changed by the power of God. The evidence is there for all to see in His message to us.

One way of dividing up the people of this world is by saying you are either uninformed, misinformed or informed. If you don't read God's Word, you are uninformed. If you rely on someone else with a particular bias to interpret it for you, you are misinformed. But if you will just read the complete book—both *Tanakh* and *Brit Hadasha* (Old and New Testaments)—and let the words speak for themselves, you will be informed. And you will see that Yeshua meets the portrait of the Messiah just as the prophets foretold.

It is also important to recognize Yeshua as Messiah within His Jewish context. As we survey His life, we see that He affirmed the cultural elements that are consistent with God's expressed will and message.

- He faithfully observed the Sabbath and all of the biblical feasts, and He used them to communicate godly principles.
- He honored the principles of the Torah as recorded by Moses, while at the same time rebuking the abuses that religious leaders had imposed by adding layers of burdens on top of the pure commandments of God.
- He called His followers to live their lives in an exemplary manner, even sacrificial in nature, and always shaped by love for one another.

These aspects of His life demonstrate that Yeshua remained faithful to His Jewish culture and to the Jewish people. In that way, He serves as a reminder that God is not finished with the Jewish people regarding His plan for this world. His covenant promises remain secure today. Ultimately the Word of God has made it clear that Yeshua is not just the one who saves us from our sin when we believe in Him, but He truly is the Messiah of Israel.