

The Servant of Jehovah:
The Sufferings of the Messiah and
The Glory That Should Follow

by
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CHAPTER III

*THE MODERN JEWISH AND RATIONALISTIC
CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF ISAIAH LIII.*

On examining the different non-Messianic and controversial interpretations of this great prophecy, given by Jewish and unbelieving Christian Rabbis, it is an important fact to be borne in mind, as Pusey points out, that next to nothing turns upon renderings of the Hebrew. "The objections raised by Jewish controversialists (and I may add by the non-Messianic Christian interpreters) in only four, or at most five, words turn on the language." It is not then a question of knowledge of Hebrew Grammar, or Philology; and ordinary intelligent English readers, with the Authorized or Revised Version of the Scriptures in their hands, are well able to judge of the merits of the different interpretations which are advanced.

"The characteristics in which all agree are, that there would be a prevailing unbelief as to the subject of the prophecy, lowly beginnings, among circumstances outwardly unfavourable, but before God, and protected by Him; sorrows, injustice, contempt, death, which were the portion of the sufferer; that he was accounted a transgressor, yet that his sufferings were, in some way, vicarious, the just for the unjust; his meek silence; his willing acceptance of his death; his being with the rich in his death; his soul being (in some way) an offering for sin, and God's acceptance of it; his prolonged life; his making many righteous; his continued intercession for transgressors; the greatness of his exaltation, in proportion to the depth of his humiliation; the submission of kings to him; his abiding reign."¹

Now these characteristics stand out in all literal translations (as distinguished from mere paraphrases) whether made by Jews or Christians, in the east or in the west. "The question," as the writer whom I have just quoted observes, "is not, 'What is the picture?'--in this all are agreed--but 'Whose image or likeness does it bear?'"

¹ Pusey in his Introduction to *The Jewish Interpreters of Isaiah liii.*

It is not necessary for us to examine those Jewish interpretations which apply this chapter to Jeremiah, Isaiah himself, Hezekiah, Josiah, or Job, etc., for they have been sufficiently refuted by Jewish writers themselves, but I may quote Hengstenberg's observation in reference to those Christian writers who have followed in the same lines.

"Among the interpretations which refer the prophecy to a single individual other than the Messiah," he says, "scarcely any one has found another defender than its own author. They are of importance only in so far as they show that the prophecy does most decidedly make the impression that its subject is a real person, not a personification; and further, that it could not by any means be an exegetical interest which induced rationalism to reject the interpretation which referred it to Christ."

The most generally accepted modern Jewish interpretation of this prophecy is that which makes it apply to the Jewish nation.

The first mention we have of this explanation is by Origen,² who, in his work against Celsus, says, "I remember once having used these prophecies in disquisition with those called wise among the Jews, whereon the Jews said that these things were prophesied of the whole people as one which was both dispersed abroad and smitten." But this may then have been the opinion of that particular Rabbi, or the counter-explanation may have been advanced by him (as has been done by later Rabbis and Jewish commentators) as a device, "in order to answer heretics" who were pressing them with the remarkable resemblance between the prophecy and its fulfilment in Jesus of Nazareth.

The first of the authoritative Jewish commentators who applied this chapter to the Jewish nation was Rashi, and since his time it has become more and more the "generally received" interpretation among the Jews. And that unbelieving Israel should have departed from the ancient interpretation which applied this prophecy to the Messiah is really not to be wondered at, for first the idea of a suffering expiatory Messiah became more and more repugnant to Rabbinic Judaism, which lost the knowledge of sin and the consciousness of the need of salvation, such as alone could make the doctrine of a vicariously suffering Redeemer acceptable. "Not knowing the holiness of God, and being ignorant of the true import of the Law," as Hengstenberg observes, "they imagine that in their own strength they can be justified before God. What they longed for was only an outward deliverance from their misery and oppressors, not an inward deliverance from sin. For this reason the Synagogue occupied itself exclusively with those Scriptures which announce a Messiah in glory, which passages also it misinterpreted."

2 Born 185 or 186 A.D.; died, 253.

Secondly, lacking or rejecting the key to the true understanding of this prophecy, namely, its fulfilment in Jesus of Nazareth, Jewish commentators were encountered by great difficulties and inexplicabilities in their attempts to expound it. This picture of a Messiah, which represented Him as passing through the deepest humiliation and suffering, and pouring out His soul unto death, appeared to them irreconcilable with those prophecies which speak of the Messiah as coming in power and glory.

And, thirdly, this explanation was not only "too flattering to the national feeling not to be extensively adopted,"³ as Pusey observes, but it has really something plausible from their point of view as its basis. Is not Israel called *Ebhed Yehovah--the Servant of Jehovah--* in this very Book of Isaiah? And has not Israel among the nations suffered humiliations, and wrongs, and tortures, and massacres, such as have been the lot or experience of no other people? In this connection it is an interesting fact that the explanation of this chapter, which made the Jewish nation to be the innocent sufferer for the guilt of the other nations, originated in what has been described as "the iron age of Judaism." Its author, Rashi, at an earlier period of his life--when he wrote his Commentary on the Talmud--actually followed the older interpretation, which applied Isaiah liii. to the Messiah, but he very probably wrote his Commentary on the Bible (in which the new interpretation is first introduced) after the second Crusade, when the hideous massacres of Jews in Spire, Worms, Mainz, Cologne, by the wild profligate swarm which gathered, after the first Crusaders were gone, might well have occasioned it. "Before the time of the first Crusade, the Jews in Germany" (says the Jewish historian and apologist Graetz, who counts as oppression any disparity or condition between them and any people among whom they sojourned) "were neither in a condition of oppression nor contempt, nor were shut out from holding property. In what has been called 'the iron age of Judaism,' there was too much occasion for representing them (as far as man was concerned) as guiltless sufferers."

To give Christian readers a good idea of what this modern Jewish interpretation involves and how consistently it is carried through, I reproduce the exposition of Manasseh-ben-Israel,⁴ which is an

3 "Every truly Christian reader feels humbled as he reads this portion of Scripture, because he sees in it a description of his Saviour, and the cost of his redemption; almost every Jew is likely to feel lifted up, because he sees in it a description of the value of Israel to the nations of the world, and of his own sufferings as a means of peace and prosperity to Gentiles. There is thus a fundamental difference in the two interpretations of the chapter, answering to the fundamental difference that there is between Judaism and Christianity--the one a religion which magnifies human efforts, the other one which makes humiliation of soul necessary to true exaltation."--Canon A. Lukyn Williams in *Christian Evidence for Jewish People*.

4 Born about 1604; died, 1657; Rabbi at Amsterdam; advocate before Cromwell and

embodiment of practically all that Jewish controversialists and rationalistic Christian writers who have followed on the same lines, have to say on this subject. He calls his Commentary the *Reconciliation*, or an answer to the question, "If this chapter is to be interpreted of the people of Israel, how came Isaiah to say that it bore the sin of many, whereas every one, according to the testimony of Ezekiel, xviii. 20, pays only for his own guilt?" and proceeds:

RECONCILIATION

"The subject of this question demands long argument, and for our verses to be perfectly understood it will be necessary to explain the whole of the chapter, which we shall do with all possible brevity, without starting any objections which may be made against other expositions, as our intention is solely to show what our own opinion is. Accordingly, for greater clearness I shall set down the literal text with a paraphrase of my own, and then illustrate it by notes.

"Isaiah prophesies: (1) The extreme prosperity of Israel at the time of the Messiah. (2) The wonder of all the nations at seeing the rise from such a low state to grandeur. (3) How they will perceive their mistake, acknowledging themselves to be the sinners and Israel to be innocent. (4) What they will think of their various sects. (5) The patience of the people in suffering the troubles of the captivity; and the reward they will receive for this suffering.

Literal Translation

Behold, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted, and shall be extolled, and shall be raised 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 man:

So will he cause many nations to speak; kings shall shut their mouths at him; what had not been told them they shall see; and what they had not heard they shall understand.

Paraphrase

Behold, my servant Israel shall understand; he shall be exalted, extolled, and raised very high, at the coming of the Messiah.

As many of the nations were astonished at thee, O Israel, saying at the time of the captivity, Truly he is disfigured above all mankind in his countenance and form:

So at that time they shall speak of thy grandeur; even kings themselves shall shut their mouths in astonishment: for what they had never been told they shall see, and what they had not heard they shall understand.

Who will believe our report? and upon whom hath the arm of Adonai been manifested?

And he came up before him as a branch, and as a root out of a dry ground; he had no form nor comeliness; and we saw him, and there was no appearance that we should covet it.

He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, accustomed to sickness; and as they hid their faces from him, he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he bare our sicknesses, and endured our sufferings; and we esteemed him wounded, smitten by God, and afflicted.

But he was pained by our transgressions, was crushed by our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and by his wounds we were healed.

All we like sheep went astray, we turned every one to his own way; and Adonai (God) caused the sin of all to meet upon him.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, and he opened not his mouth; he was carried as a lamb to the slaughter and was dumb as a sheep before its shearers; and

Who would have believed (the nations will say) what we see, had it been related to them? And look upon what a vile nation the arm of the Lord has manifested itself.

He came up miraculously as a branch and a root out of a dry ground, for he had no form nor comeliness; we saw him, but so hideous, that it did not seem to us an appearance, for which we should envy him.

He was despised and rejected from the society of men, a man of sorrows, accustomed to suffer troubles; we hid our faces from him, he was despised and unesteemed among us.

But now we see that the sicknesses and troubles which we ought in reason to have suffered, he suffered and endured, and we thought that he was justly smitten by God and afflicted.

Whereas he suffered the sicknesses and sufferings which we deserved for our sins: he bore the chastisement which our peace and felicity deserved; but his troubles appear to have been the cure of ourselves.

All we like sheep went astray: we followed every one his own sect, and so the Lord seems to have transferred on him the punishment of us all.

He was oppressed and afflicted: he was taken by us as a lamb to the slaughter and as a sheep before its shearers, depriving him of life and property: and he

he opened not his mouth.

He was taken from imprisonment and judgment, and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off from the land of the living: for the transgression of my people they were stricken.

And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his deaths, although he had not acted falsely and there was no deceit in his mouth.

And Adonai wished to crush him, made him sick: if he offer his soul as an expiation, he shall see seed, he shall prolong days, and the will of Adonai shall prosper in his hand.

From the trouble of his soul he shall see, shall be satisfied: by his wisdom my righteous servant shall justify many: and he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will distribute to him with many, and with the strong he shall divide the spoil: because he gave up his soul unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors, and he bare the sin of many: and he prayed for the transgressors.

was dumb and opened not his mouth.

From prison and these torments he is now delivered: and who would have thought of this his happy age when he was banished from the holy land? Through the wickedness of my people (each nation will say) this blow came upon them.

He was buried with malefactors, and suffered various torments with the rich, without having committed crime or used deceit with his mouth.

But it was the Lord (the prophet says) who wished to make him sick and afflict him, in order to purify him: if he offer his soul as an expiation, he shall see seed, he shall prolong his days, and the will and determination of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

For the trouble which his soul suffered in captivity, he shall see good, shall be satisfied with days: by his wisdom my righteous servant Israel shall justify the many, and he will bear their burdens.

Therefore I will give him his share of spoil among the many and powerful of Gog and Magog, because he gave himself up unto death for the sanctification of my name; and was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the offence of many, even praying for the very transgressors from whom he received injuries."

Of his "Commentary" I am only able, for lack of space, to reproduce

his notes on those verses which speak particularly of the vicariousness of the sufferings of Jehovah's righteous servant. He says, on chap. lii. 13:

"'Servant' was one of the many titles of honour with which the blessed God honoured Israel (Isa. xli. 8; Jer. xxx. 10; Ezek. xxxviii. 25; Ps. cxxxvi. 22). And as the prophet in this chapter praises the fidelity with which Israel, as loyal servants, were ever in the service of the blessed Lord, suffering innumerable persecutions in this captivity, he therefore applies this title to them here. Whence it appears that the sole subject of this prophecy is the people of Israel; and that is the true meaning of it; and the certainty of this is further proved by its connection with the preceding chapter, where the prophet says, 'Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion,' etc. (l ii. 1-12); and then he continues (ver. 13), 'Behold my servant shall prosper, or understand, etc.'

"The prophet addresses himself to the people, and shows that in the same manner as the nations of the world wondered at their low estate and fortunes, even going so far as to charge them with being disfigured, having a form unsuitable to man, and unlike other mortals, so at that period will they wonder at their prosperity and elevated state; for, seeing the sudden change in the fortune of Israel, rising from such extreme meanness to such extensive empire, all the kings of the earth will wonder and discourse on the subject. And he gives the reason of this, namely, because what had never been told them of any nation they see in the people of Israel, whose grandeur none ever equalled, and what they had never heard from their false teachers, they now understand. Or יִקְפְּצוּ, *yiqp'tsu*, signifies *they will shut their mouth*, speaking with great respect and modesty of that people which they had shortly before known as captives, subject to the will of their tyrannous power (Mic. vii. 15-16)."

On verses 4-7 he puts the following words into the mouth of the Gentile nations: "We unbelievers more justly merited the troubles and calamities which this innocent people suffered in their captivity. But we were so blind that we considered him to be wounded, smitten, and afflicted by God, and not through ourselves, and that all this came on them for keeping themselves apart from the truth, and not joining with us in our religion.

"But it was quite the contrary, for our wickedness alone was the cause of his troubles; did they not arise from any hatred God bore them. *The punishment* (מוֹסֵר , *musar*) *or discipline of our peace*, was upon him, for, as grief always accompanies pleasure, the chastisement of this happiness appears to have fallen on him. Or it may also mean, when in the enjoyment of peace adversaries were

wanting, we immediately turned our arms against this people, and what we established for the discipline and good government of our states all redounded in measures against him, decrees of death, banishment, and confiscation of property, as experience daily shows. Or

otherwise, the doctrine (מוֹסֵר , *musar*) taught by our preachers was that our tranquillity depended upon our being irritated against him, and ultimately we should find health in wounding him.

"But all we like sheep went astray, etc. That is, they will not only acknowledge the ill-treatment and bodily inflictions they had made Israel suffer, but at the same time their errors, attributing their wickedness thereto; for many will say, We all (Ishmaelites and Idumeans) like sheep went astray, each in his own way following a new sect, just as the prophet Jeremiah says (xvi. 19). And the Lord made to fall on him the wickedness of us all. That is, we erred; they followed the truth; consequently they suffered the punishments which we deserved.

"We deprived them of their property as tribute, and afflicted their bodies with various kinds of torture, yet he opened not his mouth, etc. The experience of this is seen every day, particularly in the cruelties of the Inquisition, and the false testimony raised against them to take their wool and rob them of their property. And it is exactly this that the Psalmist says, 'Thou hast given us, O Lord, like sheep appointed for meat' (xliv. 12); and further on, 'For thy sake are we killed every day; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter' (xliv. 23), suffering daily with the greatest patience these acts of tyranny and fearful calamities."

On verse 9 he says: "The nations continue, We have frequently condemned this people to death, and buried them with malefactors, and with the rich, בְּמוֹתָיו , in their various deaths, though it is certain that, in order to take away their property, we raised against them innumerable false testimonies, and martyred them, without them having committed any crime or our having any charge against them, except of having accumulated wealth, as he continues, although he had committed no הֶמְס , robbery, and there was no deceit in his mouth, that is, allowing themselves to be robbed of the property they had not robbed, and to be killed for the sanctification of the Lord, and refusing to acknowledge with their mouth any other religion.

"From verse 10 onward the prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, and relates the reason why these troubles were suffered, and the reward to be hoped from them. And, firstly, he says that the will and determination of the Lord has been to crush them and to make them sick by so many different calamities, that, being purified by these

means, they may become worthy of such great felicity. *If he offer his soul as an expiation, דָּשָׁן , surrendering it for the sake of the Law; or, if he give himself up and acknowledge himself guilty, becoming repentant, as Joseph's brethren, who said, 'But we are guilty' (Gen. xlii. 21), he shall see seed, that is, they shall multiply infinitely (Ezek. xxxvi. 37; Zech. x. 10; Deut. xxx. 5). He shall prolong days. The same prophet confirms this where he says, 'As the days of the tree,' that is, the tree of life, 'are the days of my people' (lxv. 22); and Zechariah, 'And every man with his staff in his hand from multitude of days' (viii. 4). Lastly, and *the will of the Lord*, which is to oppress him and make him sick with punishments for his greater glory, shall prosper in his hand, for the purpose and end to which they are directed will be attained. Or, the will of the Lord, which is that all should be saved and come to the holy knowledge of himself, will prosper through his hand and means and take effect.*

"By his knowledge my righteous servant shall justify many. That is, Israel, who is termed 'a righteous people and holy nation,' justifies many by his knowledge and wisdom, bringing them with brotherly love over to the true religion, and separating them from their vain sects; and this at the very time that he bears their iniquities, patiently suffering the tyranny of their wickedness. Or it may otherwise mean, At that time my servant Israel will justify and make many nations meritorious (Mic. iv. 2; Zech. viii. 23).

"And he shall bear their iniquities. For, being a most religious and holy people, he will take charge of the spiritual administration of the observance of the Law, as Moses says to Aaron, 'Thou and thy sons with thee shall bear the iniquity of the sanctuary' (Num. xviii. 1).

"Because he poured out his soul unto death, etc. The prophet here attributes four merits to them, for which they justly deserve the reward of that happiness; and again in the form of a compendium he recapitulates the contents of the chapter. (1) Because he delivered himself up to death, allowing himself to be killed for the sanctification of the Lord's name and the observance of His most holy Law. (2) Because he was reckoned among the wicked, patiently enduring to be called a heretic. (3) For having borne the sin of many, the wickedness and tyranny of others falling on his shoulders. (4) Lastly, in having observed the precept of Jeremiah, 'Seek the welfare of the city whither I have caused you to be carried captive' (xxix. 7); and this, too, so carefully that in all their prayers of the kingdom or province wherein they reside; and, what is more, it may be even for the welfare of those from whom they are receiving insult and wrong, which is highly meritorious, and a convincing proof of the constancy and patience with which they receive from the Lord's hand the yoke of captivity and the sufferings of its misfortunes."

This, then, is the modern Jewish view of this prophecy. "Among Christians," to quote the words of a great German Bible student, "the interpretation has taken nearly the same course as among the Jews. Similar causes have produced similar effects in both cases. By both, the true explanation was relinquished, when the prevailing tendencies had become opposed to its results. And if we descend to particulars, we shall find a great resemblance even between the modes of interpretation proposed by both. Even *a priori*, we could not but suppose otherwise than that the Christian Church, as long as she possessed Christ, found Him here also, where He is so clearly and distinctly set before our eyes--that as long as she in general still acknowledged the authority of Christ and of the Apostles, she could not but, here too, follow their distinct, often-repeated testimony. And so, indeed, do we find it to be. With the exception of a certain Silesian called Seidel--who, given up to total unbelief, asserted that the Messiah had never yet come, nor would ever come--and of Grotius, both of whom supposed Jeremiah to be the subject--no one of the Christian Church has, for seventeen centuries, ventured to call in question the Messianic interpretation.

"On the contrary, this passage was always considered to be the most distinct and glorious of all the Messianic prophecies. It was reserved to the last quarter of the eighteenth century to be the first to reject the Messianic interpretation. *At a time when Naturalism exercised its sway, it could no longer be retained.* For, if this passage contains a Messianic prophecy at all, its contents offer so striking an argument with the history of Christ that its origin cannot at all be accounted for in the natural way. Expedients were therefore sought for; and these were so much the more easily found that the Jews had, in this matter, already opened up the way.

"All that was necessary was only to appropriate their arguments and counter-arguments, and to invest them with the semblance of solidity by means of a learned apparatus."