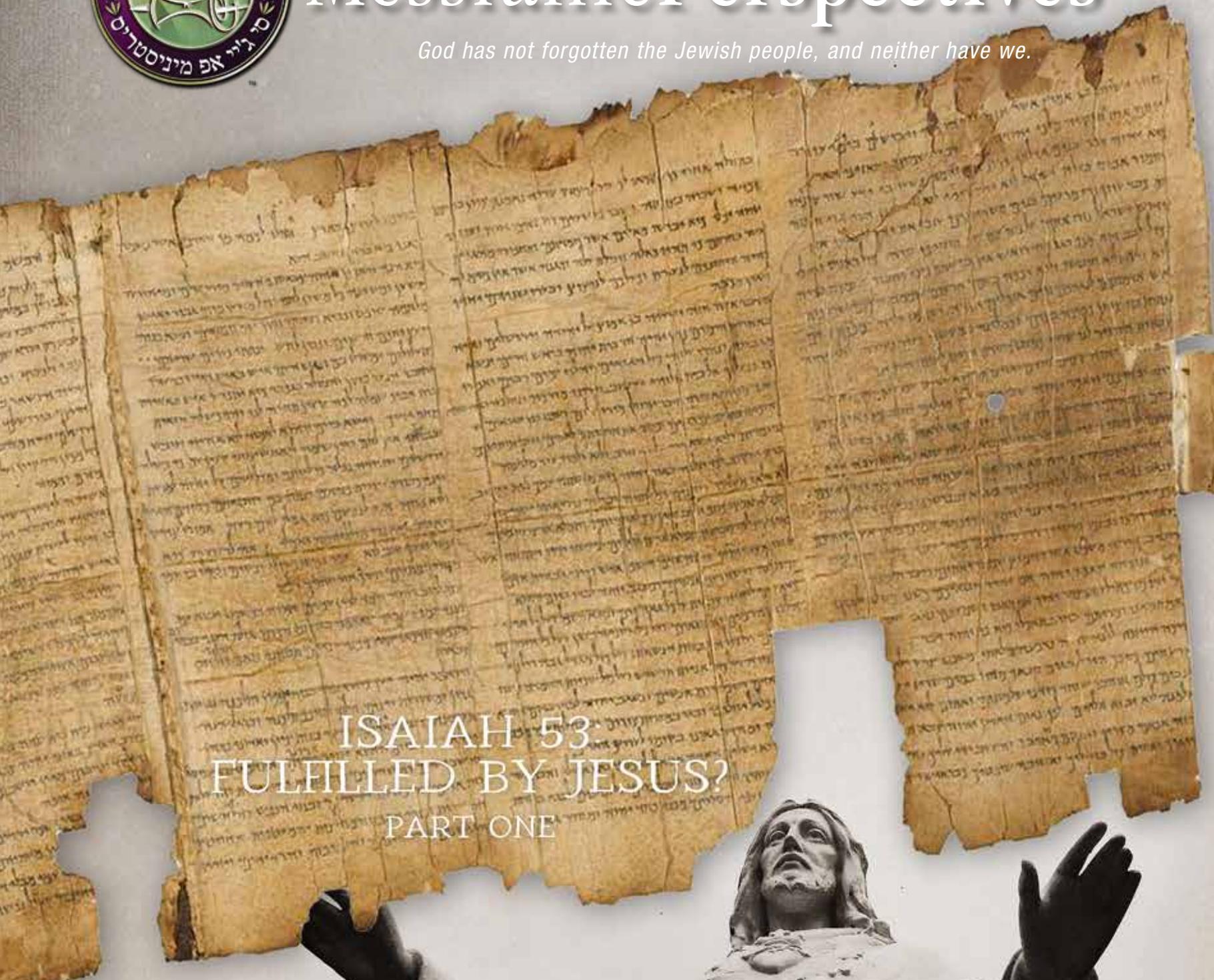




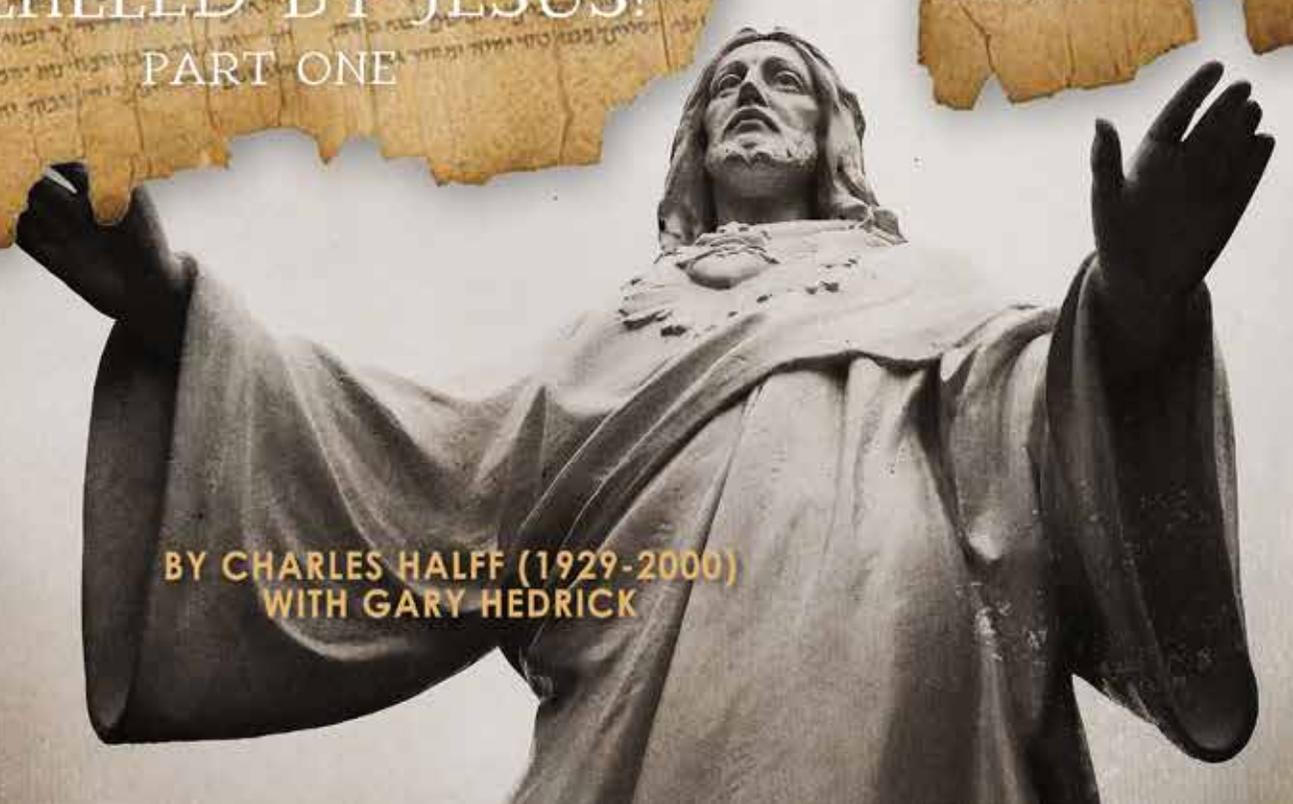
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# Messianic Perspectives®

*God has not forgotten the Jewish people, and neither have we.*



## ISAIAH 53: FULFILLED BY JESUS? PART ONE



BY CHARLES HALFF (1929-2000)  
WITH GARY HEDRICK

Our Jewish founder, Charles Halff, often shared how profoundly the Older Testament's (OT's) Messianic prophecies impacted him in the 1940s when he was searching for truth and meaning in his young life.

When sharing his testimony, he would sometimes use his family's background in the cattle business as a metaphor for his spiritual odyssey. That is, in much the same way that the Halff wranglers had driven thousands of Longhorns up the rugged Chisholm Trail in the late 1800s, Charles said the Holy Spirit had used the Messianic prophecies to prod him up a long and winding trail that eventually led him to Jesus (Yeshua).

The New Testament (NT) refers retrospectively to well over a hundred Messianic prophecies in the Older Testament (i.e., the Tanakh). Of all those prophecies, our Founder's favorite one, and the one that influenced him the most, was Isaiah 53. The NT quotes this amazing chapter at least eleven times in its 27 books. The NT writers use "Isaiah 53" language and imagery in dozens of other instances (without a direct citation).

The article below is abridged from Chapter 13 of the upcoming, expanded version of our Founder's life story: *A Jewish Journey to Jesus: The Life Story of Charles Halff, Jr.* This article is edited and paraphrased from Charles' own notes and earlier editions of his story. Outdated passages have been updated, clarified, and reworded as needed since our Founder's homegoing to Heaven in November of 2000. The explanatory footnotes at the bottom of each page are Gary's, so if they contain any misstatements, they are his alone.



I have mentioned before how profoundly the New Testament's (NT's) use of the Old Testament (Tanakh, or OT) altered the trajectory of my spiritual journey in the 1940s. I was especially impacted by the fifty-third chapter of the Prophet Isaiah. Once I recognized it as a Messianic prophecy, I was left wondering why I hadn't noticed it before.

One reason may have been that I was too young to make the connection. But there may have been another reason, as well: namely, that Isaiah 53<sup>1</sup> was never read or mentioned in our congregational services. Sometimes they would skip right over it, almost as if it wasn't there. That's why some of our Messianic friends refer to it as Isaiah's "forbidden chapter."

## The "Forbidden Chapter"

Later, I discovered why this was so. The reason is that Isaiah 53 is omitted from the Haftarah's annual cycle of weekly public readings from the *Nevi'im* (the Prophets).<sup>2</sup> That was why I had no recollection of having ever heard this chapter read publicly in the synagogue.

It seems oddly coincidental that the chapter in Isaiah that points to Jesus more graphically than any other just happens to be overlooked in public reading and liturgy.

Nonetheless, the rabbis vigorously deny any attempt at censorship. They assure us that there is no conspiracy and no attempt to suppress the reading of Isaiah's fifty-third chapter. Any Jewish person is perfectly free to read and study any chapter in the Hebrew Bible, bar none, they say. Nothing to see here, folks—please move along.

It may be true that rabbis today have little or no interest in censoring Isaiah 53. However, that's not really the question here. The issue at hand is this: Has Isaiah 53 ever been censored? Was there a point (perhaps in medieval times when there was so much rancor and debate between Jewish and Christian apologists) when the powers-that-be felt the need to steer their people away from a biblical text (like Isaiah 53) that might be "misunderstood" as a prophetic reference to Jesus (Yeshua) of Nazareth?

<sup>1</sup> Chapter 53 is part of Isaiah's fourth "Servant Song" (52:13–53:12). The first three songs are found in 42:1–4, 49:1–6, and 50:4–9. These four passages are called "songs" because of their poetic, lyrical structure in Hebrew. They present the service, suffering, execution, resurrection, and ultimate exaltation of Yahweh's "Servant," whom we believe to be Jesus of Nazareth. The rabbis disagree, of course, variously identifying the Servant instead as Isaiah himself, the Persian King Cyrus, or even the nation Israel, which has suffered so greatly for so long.

<sup>2</sup> In the synagogues, the Haftarah's readings from the *Nevi'im* follow (and complement) the weekly Torah portions. This practice began in the second century BC, when the Seleucid (Greek) King Antiochus Epiphanes outlawed Sabbath observance, which effectively banned the weekly Torah readings. As a clever work-around, Jewish leaders substituted portions from the Prophets (which had not been outlawed) that shared similar themes to the forbidden Torah readings. After the Seleucids passed from the scene, the practice of public reading from complementary passages in both the Law and the Prophets continued and became a tradition among the Jewish people.

## Messianic Perspectives®

Dr. Gary Hedrick, *Editor in Chief*  
Brian Nowotny, *Publisher*  
Erastos Leiloglou, *Creative Director*



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## THE SUFFERING SERVANT IN THE FOURTH SERVANT SONG (ISAIAH 52:13–53:12<sup>5</sup>)

He will be exalted in due time (52:13).	Phil. 2:9
He will be disfigured by suffering (52:14; 53:2).	Mark 15:17, 19
He will be widely rejected (53:1, 3).	John 12:37–38
He will bear our sins and sorrows (v. 4).	Rom. 4:25; 1 Peter 2:24–25
He will offer a blood atonement (v. 5).	Rom. 3:25
He will be our substitute (vv. 6, 8).	2 Cor. 5:21
He will voluntarily accept our guilt and punishment (v. 7).	John 10:11
He will be buried in a rich man's tomb (v. 9).	John 19:38–42
He will justify many by bearing their iniquities (vv. 10–11).	Rom. 5:15–19
He will die with transgressors (v. 12).	Mark 15:27–28; Luke 22:37
Passing through the darkness of death, He will finally see light (v. 11, LXX). <sup>6</sup>	Matt. 28:1–20

Dr. Hananel Mack, professor of Talmud at Bar Ilan University in Israel, offers this refreshingly unguarded observation in his preface to a 2005 article he wrote in *HaAretz*:

Generally speaking, **Jews excluded from the Haftarat those verses on which Christians based the principles of their religious faith . . . It would appear that the phenomenon is not mere coincidence** and that the trend discussed in the above examples and in others that have not been mentioned, was consciously implemented. Although Jews tended to omit certain passages from the Prophets in their haftarah readings, no Jewish scholar ever considered avoiding discussing and studying them as an integral part of the Jewish Scriptures.<sup>3</sup>



Here is yet another comment—this one from a mainstream Jewish sourcebook:

Because of the christological interpretation given to the [fifty-third] chapter by Christians, it is omitted from the series of prophetic lessons (*Haftarot*) of the Deuteronomy Sabbaths. These seven lessons are called the “Seven (Chapters) of Comfort,” and are taken from the preceding and following parts of the book: The omission is deliberate and striking.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Hananel Mack, “Jesus—What Happened to Jesus’ Haftarah?” in *HaAretz* (12/08/2005), at [haaretz.com](http://haaretz.com) (emphasis added in bold). This left-leaning newspaper, founded in Jerusalem in 1918, is the longest-running print newspaper in Israel and is known for its willingness to air controversial viewpoints. Its American edition is sold with the *New York Times*.

<sup>4</sup> *Rabbinic Anthology*, C.G. Montefiore & H.M.J. Loewe, eds. (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 544.

So, then, was there a rationale behind the exclusion of Isaiah 53 from the Haftarah? Or was it just random—perhaps because the chapter was too lengthy, or because it didn’t match the theme of a corresponding Torah reading? Jewish liturgy (including the Haftarah cycle of public readings) has evolved over many centuries, and some of the details of this evolution are shrouded in the mists of antiquity. So, we may never know for sure precisely *how* or *when* the omission of Isaiah 53 took place, or *who* was responsible; but it’s not much of a stretch for us to speculate as to *why*.

### Examining Isaiah 53

The parallels between Isaiah 53 and the NT Crucifixion narrative are truly remarkable. Little wonder, then, that as a young and bright-eyed Jewish seeker for truth, I was so transfixed by this “forbidden chapter.” The fact that it was overlooked at shul only heightened my curiosity.

During my high school years, in those after-school study sessions with seminarian Joe MacNamee, I felt obliged to assume the role of devil’s advocate and defend the rabbinic view that Isaiah’s Servant was Israel, not the Messiah. As time went by, however, I secretly began harboring doubts about the things I was saying.

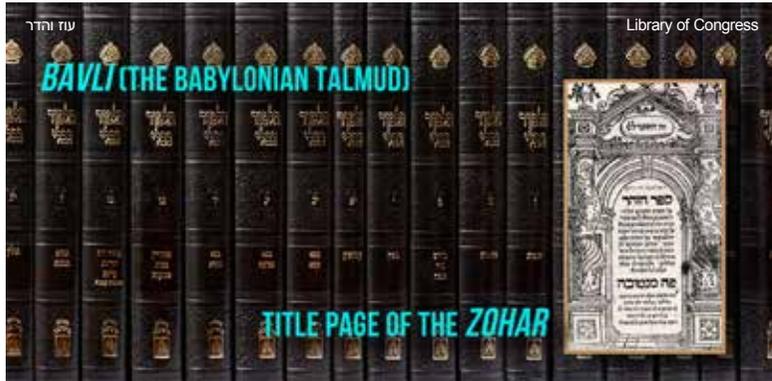
The rabbis insist that the “Suffering Servant” is the People of Israel, and they say we are portrayed as suffering in Isaiah 53 because the *goyim* (i.e., the “nations”) brought persecution down on us. This ill-treatment at the hands of the nations was divine payback for our own national sins and shortcomings. That was (and is) the rabbis’ mantra, in a nutshell. However, something about it seemed incongruous to me. The pieces of the puzzle weren’t fitting together properly.

<sup>5</sup> This chart is adapted (with our changes) from *The NKJV Study Bible*, Earl Radmacher, Ronald Allen & H. Wayne House, eds. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2007), 1125.

<sup>6</sup> The Septuagint (LXX) is an ancient (200’s BC) Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Roman numeral for “70” reflects the fact that seventy Jewish scholars worked on this translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. The LXX is a valuable resource in evaluating textual variants because it is nearly a thousand years *older* than the rabbis’ standardized Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT). Transcripts of early sermons preserved in the Book of Acts (e.g., Acts 2:14–39, c. AD 30) reflect the Apostles’ reliance on the LXX in their preaching.

## Is Isaiah 53 Messianic or Not?

Gradually, as I dug into Jewish sources for more information, I began to realize that many of them viewed the Suffering Servant's role in Isaiah 53 as Messianic—even if they stopped short of saying He was the Messiah. *Bavli* (the Babylonian Talmud) intimates that Isaiah 53 is about a Messianic figure. It states: “[The Messiah’s] name is ‘the leper scholar,’ as it is written, ‘Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows yet we did esteem him a leper, smitten of God, and afflicted.’”<sup>7</sup>



The *Zohar*, the primary text of the Jewish mystical tradition, admittedly includes some strange and non-biblical ideas and teachings—like reincarnation, for instance. Nonetheless, the *Zohar* speaks for a broad swath of ultra-orthodox Judaism and should be taken seriously. It clearly sees Isaiah's Suffering Servant in Chapter 53 as serving in a Messianic role. Not only that, but it also has Him suffering vicariously for the sins of others:

There is in the Garden of Eden a palace named the Palace of the Sons of Sickness: This palace the Messiah then enters, and summons every sickness, every pain, and every chastisement of Israel; they all come and rest upon him. **And were it not that He had thus lightened them off Israel and taken them upon himself**, there had been no man able to bear Israel's chastisements for transgression of the law: and **this is that which is written, “Surely our sickness he hath carried.”**<sup>8</sup>

It's interesting to note that there's a wide array of views among Christian scholars about Isaiah 53. One of these scholars is the popular British (Anglican) author, John Goldingay, formerly a professor at Fuller Seminary in California.

Goldingay draws a carefully nuanced distinction between the *meaning* of a passage like Isaiah 53 and its *significance*. That is, the *meaning* of Isaiah 53 may not apply in a strictly literal way to Jesus of Nazareth; however, the NT writers undoubtedly saw Him as “part of its *significance*” (Goldingay's words). The Professor goes on to say that the *meaning* of a passage can be frozen and finalized, even while “its *significance* is unlimited.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Sanhedrin 98b. One of the rabbis' answers to this point is that the Talmud's argument here is tongue-in-cheek—that is, it's meant as a joke, not to be taken seriously as a reference to the Messiah. They also make much of the fact that Tractate Sanhedrin has numerous names for the Messiah (e.g., “Hezekiah,” “Haninah,” “Yinnon,” “Shiloh,” and “Menachem”), but “Jesus” (or His rabbinic name, *Yeshu*) isn't included in the list. The rabbis further point out that Jesus never had leprosy, so far as we know, so how could He be the “Leper Messiah” of Jewish lore? Charles found these arguments ridiculous and patently unconvincing. Sanhedrin 98b is a recollection of rabbinic discussions about the Messiah—and it is no joke. It even mentions Hillel's view that the Messiah had already come in the days of Hezekiah: “There will be no further Messiah for Israel, for they already consumed him in the time of Hezekiah.”

<sup>8</sup> Zohar VI 2:212a, referenced in *Zohar Education Project: Pritzker Edition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 20. Emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> Goldingay, *Ibid.*, 35.

I remain convinced—after a half-century of study and contemplation—that the most reasonable, plain-sense way to interpret Isaiah 53 is within a Messianic framework. I see this approach as being compatible with Goldingay's distinction between *meaning* and *significance*. However, it diverges somewhat from Walter Kaiser's direct-fulfillment, “promise-plan” approach.<sup>10</sup>

For the inspired NT writers, the significance of this marvelous fifty-third chapter is that it foreshadows, in remarkable midrashic (that is, expanded and expository) style, Messiah Jesus' atoning work on Calvary, where He paid the price to redeem anyone and everyone who would believe in Him—Jew and Gentile alike. Here, Isaiah also points forward to the Lord's Resurrection and declares His redemptive, spiritual mission an unqualified success.<sup>11</sup>

Does this mean that a Jewish person reading Isaiah 53 in the sixth century BC would have easily recognized it as prefiguring a Messiah who wouldn't arrive until centuries later? Not necessarily. In fact, as we'll see in a moment, an Ethiopian government official reading this fifty-third chapter in the first century AD (roughly 700 years after Isaiah wrote it) was mystified by its meaning. He required the guidance of the Apostle Philip to understand that it pointed to Jesus of Nazareth.

### “Midrashic”—What Does It Mean?

The Hebrew word *midrash* (מדרש) means “investigation” or “inquiry.” In Judaism, the *midrashim* (plural) are commentaries or legal (halakhic) expositions in which rabbis from past ages elaborate on what they see as the meaning and applications of various biblical passages. *Midrash Tehillim* (Hebrew: מדרש תהלים), for instance, is a commentary on the Psalms.

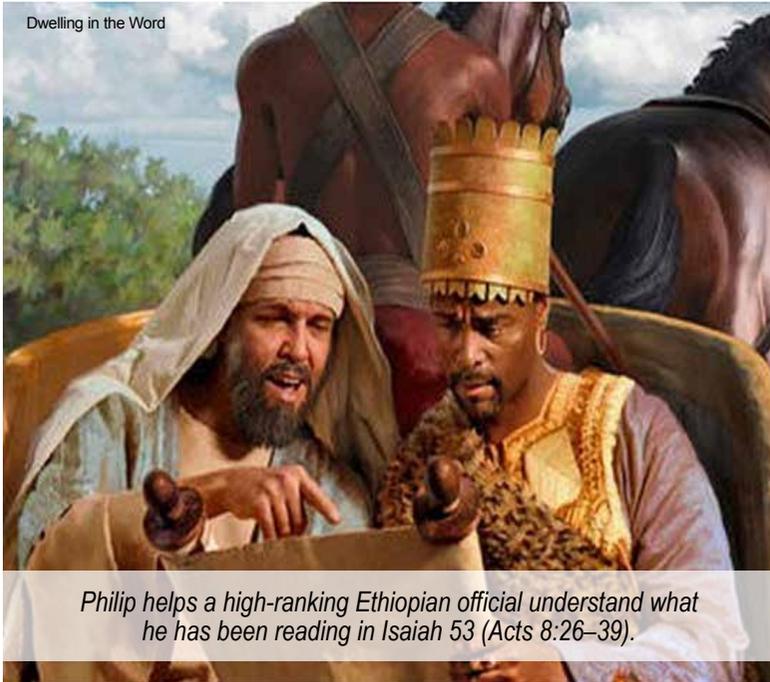
A midrashic approach to Scripture is generally more flexible than a simple, literal reading of the surface text. In a midrash, the commentator engages creatively with the text and doesn't always restrict himself to the immediate context of the passage or its most obvious meaning. A midrash may also involve *application* rather than mere *explanation*.

Much of the Talmud's content reflects this looser and less confining approach to biblical interpretation.

Some evangelical scholars (like Martin Pickup, a former student of Jacob Neusner) suggest that the New Testament writers, who were Jewish (yes, even Luke), may have instinctively employed a midrashic approach in their treatment of certain OT Messianic prophecies.

<sup>10</sup> When considering a prophecy like Isaiah 7:14, Kaiser, and others with similar views, say the passage had no direct fulfillment in the eighth century BC. So, according to Kaiser, there was never a boy named Immanuel whose mother was a “young maiden,” and who lived on “curds and honey” until he was old enough to know the difference between right and wrong (vv. 14–15). The prophecy's one and only fulfillment, they would say, was in Jesus of Nazareth in the first century AD, some seven hundred years later. He doesn't dismiss prophetic typology entirely, but he rejects the notion of dual (i.e., near-term and long-term) fulfillments of prophecies like this one. He keeps things simple and orderly by insisting on one, direct fulfillment (rather than two). Messianic scholar (and our friend) Arnold Fruchtenbaum takes a position similar to Kaiser's.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Half's boyhood rabbi, Dr. Ephraim Frisch, had assured him that Jesus failed in His mission as Messiah because He didn't fix the world and introduce the Messianic Age of universal peace and prosperity. However, Frisch didn't understand that the Lord's immediate priority in the first century was not to bring peace to the world, but to first bring peace to the human heart. This was His redemptive, spiritual mission—and it was an overwhelming success. His political mission—which will usher in the utopian, worldwide Messianic Age—is yet to come.

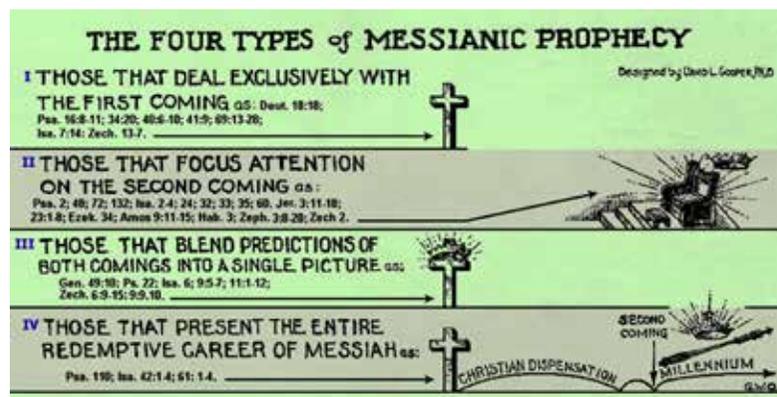


Philip helps a high-ranking Ethiopian official understand what he has been reading in Isaiah 53 (Acts 8:26–39).

We have no way of knowing for sure how much Isaiah himself understood about all of this, but he may well have been aware that (here in Isaiah 7) both near- and long-term prophetic fulfillments were in view. After all, Isaiah introduces this Messianic prophecy with these words: “Hear now, O house of David . . .” (v. 13). This reliance on the Davidic Covenant may well be the key that expands the timeframe here in 7:14 to include not only the *near-term* situation of King Ahaz of Israel (and his ongoing conflict with Assyria), but also a more *long-term* aspect finding its fulfillment in Messiah’s birth to the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem. Even without the reference to David, though, we would still know it’s a Messianic prophecy because Matthew 1:22–23 says it is.

There are, in fact, four types of Messianic prophecies. First, there are those that deal specifically with the Messiah’s *first coming* in Bethlehem. Second, there are those that have His Second Coming in view. Third, some prophecies are hybrids that blend aspects of the first and second comings in one, composite picture. And fourth, there are other prophecies that present a wide, panoramic view of Messiah’s entire redemptive career.

Dr. David L. Cooper (1886–1965) devised the following handwritten chart to illustrate these four categories of Messianic prophecy.<sup>12</sup>



<sup>12</sup>We are indebted to Precept Austin for calling our attention to Dr. Cooper’s helpful, hand-drawn chart on Messianic prophecy. See “Isaiah 53 Commentary, Resources” at [preceptaustin.org](http://preceptaustin.org). Charles held Precept Ministries, as well as Dr. Cooper and his Biblical Research Society, in highest regard.

## The Ethiopian Eunuch

Isaiah 53 took its place as the premier Messianic prophecy very early in church history. In fact, there’s a fascinating story in the NT Book of Acts (where Luke records events that took place c. AD 30–40) involving the high-ranking finance minister of the Kingdom of Ethiopia. This influential, Black gentleman (perhaps a Jewish proselyte) had traveled from Africa to Israel to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Jerusalem Temple. He somehow acquired a scroll of Isaiah (very rare in those days, and expensive, because scrolls were written out by hand), and he was sitting in the chariot with his driver, reading the fifty-third chapter out loud.

This Ethiopian (whose name we don’t know) was evidently fluent in Hebrew and was intrigued by what he was reading; however, he was having difficulty understanding it. It was obvious to him that Isaiah was describing Someone very special—and he wanted to know who that Person (the “Servant”) was. So, the Lord dispatched Philip, one of the twelve apostles, to meet up with this Ethiopian and explain the Messianic significance of Isaiah’s prophecy to him. Luke takes it from here:

*So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?”*

*And [the Ethiopian] said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him [i.e., in his chariot].*

*The place in the Scripture which he read was this: “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent, So He opened not His mouth.*

*“In His humiliation His justice was taken away, And who will declare His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.”*

*So the eunuch answered Philip and said, “I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?”*

**Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him.**

*Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, “See, [here is] water. What hinders me from being baptized?”*

*Then Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”*

*So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.*

*Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more; and he went on his way rejoicing*

(Acts 8:30–39, emphasis added).

We’re told here that Philip started with Isaiah 53 and “preached Jesus” from the Hebrew Scriptures to this Ethiopian man. So, then, this fifty-third chapter reflects—whether in terms of its *meaning* or *significance*—the Gospel.

The story has a happy ending: The Ethiopian became a believer in Jesus and was happily immersed as a public confirmation of his newfound faith.

## The Taboo of Believing in Jesus

There is some irony in the fact that believing in Jesus as Messiah is so looked down upon in Jewish culture. After all, the Messianic concept holds a central place in Torah-believing (Orthodox) Judaism. Finding the Messiah, and learning His identity, should be the highest aspiration of every serious student of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Some people might argue that we should give the rabbis some slack here because, during the course of Jewish history, they have had to deal with numerous false messiahs. There have been many disappointments—as well as more than a few tragedies. Notable examples include:

- **Simon Bar Kokhba (AD 132–135):** Bar Kokhba led first-century Jewish zealots in a wholesale revolt against the Roman Empire. As a result of the rebellion's early successes, Simon came to be regarded as a Messiah by such prominent figures as Rabbi Akiva, among others. However, the revolt was brutally put down by Rome, and thousands of lives were lost, including Simon's. Judea was left in a smoldering ruin, and Bar Kokhba's Messianic endorsement was revoked.

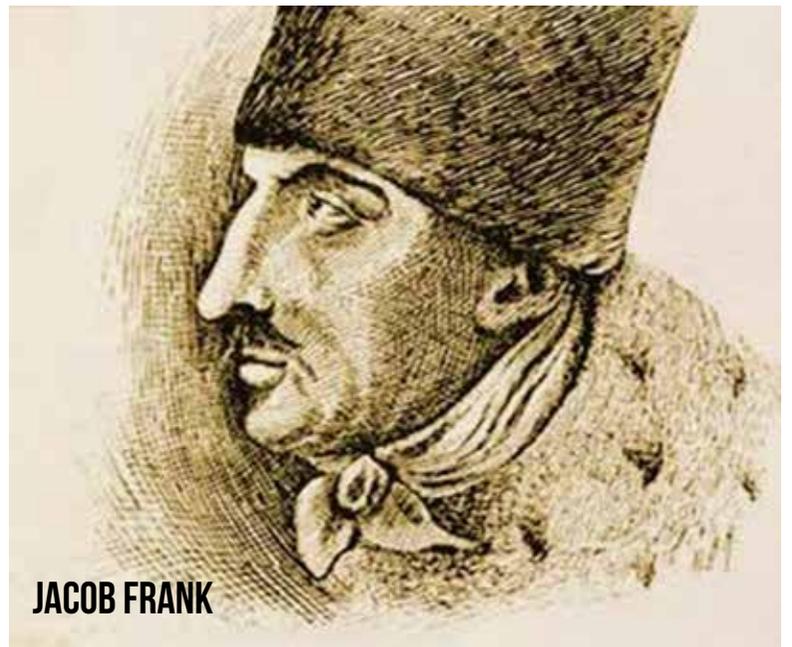


- **Moses of Crete (5th century):** This false messiah claimed to be "a prophet like [Moses]" (Deut. 18:15). He founded a movement in Crete where he promised to lead his followers back to Israel by parting the seas—like Moses had done during the ancient Exodus. At the appointed time, many of his followers, convinced of his Messianic powers, cast themselves into the sea, reportedly leading, tragically, to mass drownings.

- **David Alroy (12th century):** Also known as Menachem ben Solomon, Alroy led a Messianic movement in Persia (modern Iran) and Kurdistan, stirring up Jews to revolt against their Muslim rulers so they could reclaim Muslim-controlled Jerusalem. He was reputed to possess magical abilities, but those abilities ultimately failed him. His movement ended abruptly with his death.



- **Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676):** The most well-known of the false messiahs, Sabbatai Zevi garnered a massive following in the 17th century. He proclaimed himself the Messiah but later converted to Islam under threat of death at the hand of the Ottoman Sultan. His compliance led, understandably, to disillusionment and division among his followers.



- **Jacob Frank (1726–1791):** Frank declared himself a reincarnation of Sabbatai Zevi (see above) and Jacob the Patriarch. Later, he proclaimed himself the Messiah and gained a following in Europe, especially among those disenchanted with traditional Judaism. His controversial teachings eventually led to his excommunication by the rabbinate and his conversion to Catholicism.

- Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994): While the seventh Hasidic rebbe of Chabad never made a direct claim to be the Messiah, he didn't deny it, either. He never stopped his followers from chanting, "Long live the Rebbe, King Messiah!" In fact, some of his devotees in the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic movement believed that relocating from NYC to Israel could be the next phase in Schneerson's ascension to the Messianic office. So, in 1992, he approved the building of a personal residence in Kfar Chabad, a religious community situated between Ben Gurion Airport and Tel Aviv. From the bus, we have often pointed out the white building to our tour groups on our way from the airport in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

*Menachem Schneerson, was the much-revered Lubavitcher Rebbe who died in 1994. Based in part on Isaiah 53, a small sect of his followers continues to hope for his resurrection from the dead as Israel's long-awaited King–Messiah.*



The Rebbe died in 1994, following a series of strokes that left him largely incapacitated and unable to speak. Still, a small group continues to cling to Schneerson's messiahship. They hope and pray that he will eventually be resurrected and emerge from his tomb at the Ohel, the burial place of the Lubavitcher Rebbes in Queens, New York. Sometimes, a member of this sect may be referred to by the nickname "Yechi," a term derived from their Messianic cry, "Yechi Adoneinu Moreinu veRabbeinu Melech HaMoshiach l'olam va'ed!" ("Long live our Master, our Teacher, and our Rabbi, King Messiah, forever and ever!").<sup>13</sup>

Note, however, that no one suggests that a Lubavitcher Jew ceases being Jewish when he claims that the Rebbe is the Messiah—or if he claims that the Rebbe fulfills certain aspects of Isaiah 53. That level of venom and vitriol seems to be reserved for Jesus of Nazareth and His Jewish followers.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Rumors have circulated over the years that the Rebbe was buried with a telephone in his tomb. This is a cheap and unnecessary jab at the Yechi sect—and it is not true. It should also be noted that the Yechi movement possesses no formal recognition from the broader Chabad–Lubavitch organization.

<sup>14</sup> Not only does the Resurrection set Jesus of Nazareth apart from other claimants to the Messianic throne, but His claims of divinity and His unique relationship with the Father are also unparalleled. There were times when His claims prompted the scribes and Pharisees to seek to kill Him on the spot as a blasphemer (e.g., John 8:48–59; 10:30), so there is little doubt as to His meaning. The Prophet Daniel witnessed a vision that reflected this unique relationship between God the Father and His Son, the Messiah: *I was watching in the night visions, And behold, [One] like the Son of Man, Coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, And they brought Him near before Him (Dan. 7:13).*



## Could Isaiah's Servant Be the Nation Israel?

In a word, the answer is no. That doesn't work. Here's why.

The rabbis' contention that the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 is the nation Israel rather than a Messianic individual doesn't fit the context. For one thing, it leaves the Servant (i.e., Israel as a nation) suffering and dying for his own sins. However, the Prophet says the Servant suffers vicariously *for other people's sins*—not for His own sins. Note the Jewish Publication Society's 1985 translation:<sup>15</sup>

*"We all went astray like sheep, Each going his own way; And the Lord visited upon him [the Servant] The guilt of all of us."<sup>16</sup>*

*He was maltreated, yet he was submissive, He did not open his mouth; Like a sheep being led to slaughter, Like a ewe, dumb before those who shear her, He did not open his mouth.*

*By oppressive judgment he was taken away, Who could describe his abode? For he was cut off from the land of the living Through the sin of my people, who deserved the punishment.<sup>17</sup>*

*And his grave was set among the wicked, And with the rich, in his death as Though he had done no injustice And had spoken no falsehood.<sup>18</sup>*

*But the Lord chose to crush him by disease,<sup>19</sup> That, if he made himself an offering for guilt, He might see offspring and have long life, And that through him the Lord's purpose might prosper (53:6–10).<sup>20</sup>*

<sup>15</sup> Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 873–74.

<sup>16</sup> The guilt (or trespass) offering was one of five different sacrifices offered in the OT Tabernacle and (later) the Temple (Lev. 5:14–6:7; 7:1–6). The sacrificial animal could be either a lamb or a ram. This "offering for guilt" is mentioned again in Verse 10.

<sup>17</sup> Note the dichotomy here: The people deserved God's punishment; His Servant didn't (v. 8).

<sup>18</sup> There is no record of Jesus of Nazareth ever having done anything wrong. He never spoke a false word or committed any crime. The worst accusation His enemies could come up with was His occasional disregard of rabbinic tradition or His overruling the questionable dictums of sages (e.g., Matt. 12:1–8).

<sup>19</sup> Crucifixion is, in a certain sense, the ultimate "disease" because it causes the catastrophic shut-down of vital organs, one at a time, resulting finally in death by suffocation, blood depletion, and/or heart/renal failure.

<sup>20</sup> Having just died and been buried, how could the Servant be said to "see offspring and have long life"? The rabbis want an answer to this question. And they're right—it appears to be a contradiction. However, the discrepancy disappears once we understand that the Messiah's death in Isaiah 53 was only temporary. The prophecy means He will be resurrected to see a host of spiritual offspring—reminiscent of the innumerable descendants promised to Abraham in Genesis 22:17. And it happened just that way! How amazing it is to realize that Jesus was the only Person in the history of the world who ever "borrowed" a tomb!

In their effort to prove the point that the Servant is Israel, not the Messiah, the rabbis like to take us to the second Servant Song, where the Servant is identified as the People of Israel collectively: “*And He said to me, ‘You are My servant, O Israel, In whom I will be glorified’*” (49:3). Their reasoning: Since the Servant is Israel in the second Servant Song, he must also be Israel in the fourth Servant Song (including Isaiah 53). It would, after all, be inconsistent to switch identities from the second to the fourth Servant Song. Therefore, they say, once again, that the Servant in Isaiah 53 is the nation Israel, not the Messiah.



However, this point is easily answered. First, Isaiah uses the word “servant” 21 times in his book, and it refers to a variety of individuals—including Isaiah himself (e.g., 20:3). So, it’s not limited to a singular meaning. The passage in 49:3 is more likely a reference to the Servant (Messiah) as an idealized “Israel.” We find a similar phenomenon in Ezekiel 37:24–28, where the Messiah is called “David” centuries after King David had died—so, Messiah there in Ezekiel is an idealized “David,” a descendant from the Davidic line, and the ultimate Shepherd–King (John 10:11–18), but not literally the resurrected David.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, the Servant in Isaiah 49:3 is an idealized “Israel,” not meant to be a literal reference to the nation. This becomes very clear a few verses later when Isaiah says the Servant’s mission is “to gather Israel to himself” (v. 5). So, are we supposed to think the nation Israel will gather itself to itself? It doesn’t make sense. The Servant and Israel are not in any reasonable sense the same entity in Chapter 53.

<sup>21</sup>Yes, the resurrected David will be present in the Millennium—and he will no doubt be grateful, like all of us, to be there. However, he won’t have the divine characteristics attributed to Messiah, Son of David (e.g., see Psalm 2:1–6; 110:1–7). In Jeremiah 23, this Messianic King is called “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS” (v. 6). This is above even King David’s paygrade!



Furthermore, the passage intimates that God’s Servant has no sins of His own to require atonement (vv. 4–6, 9). This criterion certainly doesn’t fit the nation Israel. Over and over in the Prophets, God chastises Israel for her many sins (e.g., Jer. 32:31–32; cp. Deut. 28:64–68). So, the nation cannot be portrayed as an innocent party suffering for a guilty party’s sins.



Isaiah also says that the Servant “was cut off from the land of the living” (v. 8); that is, He was executed (see also v. 9). The nation Israel, however, has never been “cut off” or destroyed. Antisemites have tried countless times to kill off the Jews (genocide), but those enemies have not succeeded—and they never will. The cry continues to echo through the hallowed halls of history—*Yisra’el Chai*, Israel Lives! So, again, Isaiah’s Servant in Chapter 53 cannot be the nation Israel.

One of the most forceful statements about the coming of the Messiah in His role as God's Servant, comes from no one less than the Rambam—Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1138–1204). He sounds almost as though he's using Jesus of Nazareth as a template for his future coming of another, yet-unnamed Messiah:

“What is the manner of Messiah's advent, and where will be the place of his appearance? . . . There shall rise up one of whom none have known before, and **signs and wonders which they shall see performed by him will be the proofs of his true origin**; for the Almighty, where he declares to us his mind upon this matter, says, ‘Behold a man whose name is the Branch, and he shall branch forth out of his place’ (Zech. 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, etc. . . . But the unique phenomenon attending his manifestation is, that all the kings of the earth will be thrown into terror at the fame of him—their kingdoms will be in consternation, and they themselves will be devising whether to oppose him with arms, or to adopt some different course, confessing, in fact, their inability to contend with him or ignore his presence and **so confounded at the wonders which they will see him work, that they will lay their hands upon their mouth**; 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 (Isa. 52:15).”<sup>22</sup>

Our Hebrew-speaking friends at *One for Israel* cite two more reasons the Servant in Isaiah 53 cannot be the nation Israel. The first reason draws on the Hebrew text:

The Suffering Servant is consistently presented as an individual and not as a plurality or collective noun, like a people group. Verse 8 says, “For the transgressions of My people He was stricken.” What people was Isaiah part of? The people of Israel, of course. So “my people” refers to the people of Israel. Therefore, Israel cannot be the Suffering Servant of the Lord. If the people of Israel was the Servant of the Lord here, who would be “my people”?<sup>23</sup>

The second reason *One for Israel* says the Servant can't be Israel is that He raises no objection to His condemnation:

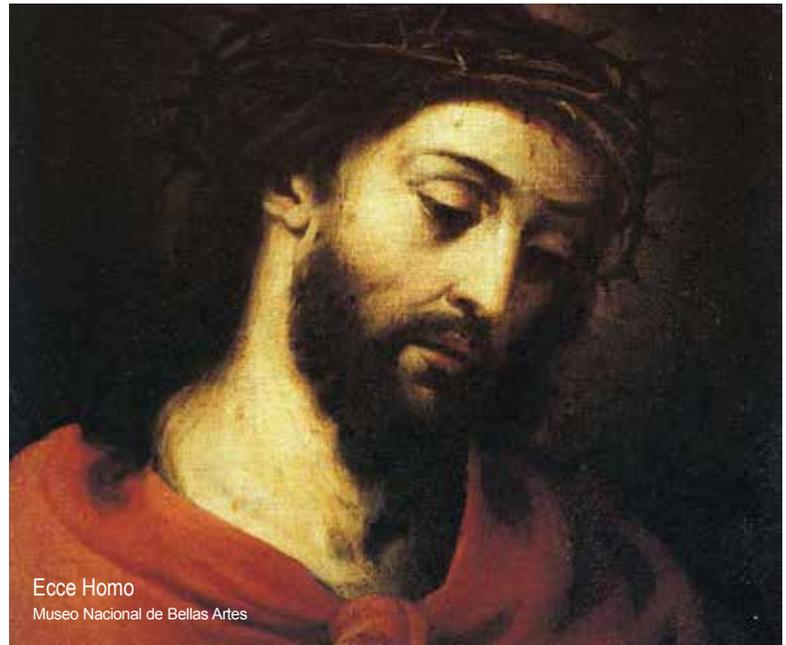
Moreover, the Servant of the Lord suffers willingly, submissively, and without objection. The people of Israel have never suffered willingly! According to the Torah, the suffering of Israel was a result of sin not because of their righteousness, whereas the Servant of the Lord suffered as a righteous person not because He had sinned. The Servant of the Lord was guiltless but according to the Torah the people of Israel were always punished and suffered because of their sin and the gentiles didn't get healing from God because Jewish people were persecuted.<sup>24</sup>

All of this points quite convincingly to the Messiah being the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, not the nation. We believe He is *Adon Yeshua* (the Lord Jesus).

<sup>22</sup>Maimonides' *Letter to Yemen* (12th century AD). Isaiah 52:15 is part of Isaiah's fourth Servant Song, which includes Chapter 53. Emphasis added. The Talmud attributes Jesus' ability to work miracles to “sorcery.” *Sanhedrin* 43a relates the trial and execution of someone named *Yeshu* (Jesus) and his five disciples. He is a sorcerer who has led other Jews into apostasy with his magic. In the end, he is stoned and hanged on the Eve of Passover.

<sup>23</sup>“Isaiah 53: The Forbidden Chapter—A Commentary” (*One for Israel* at [oneforisrael.org](http://oneforisrael.org), 10/23/2023), 8.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*



## Prophecy: Messiah's ID

If you've ever been pulled over by law enforcement for speeding, or for rolling through a stop sign, you know that the first thing the officer asks for is your identification. He (or she) needs to know who you are. You've also had to show an ID if you've ever purchased a firearm. The government wants some assurance that you're someone who will handle that weapon responsibly. They, too, want to know who you are.

Likewise, God wanted His people—those who had ears to hear—to recognize His Messiah when He finally arrived. Messianic prophecy, then, is His ID. It shows the world who He is.

Some skeptics have suggested that Jesus and His followers somehow manipulated the events of His *life* to make it appear as though He was fulfilling the prophecies. The problem with this approach, though, is that many of those prophecies point to life-events that could not have been orchestrated by anyone but God—like the place of His birth (John 7:42; Micah 5:2), the family's early journey to Egypt (Matt. 2:13–19; Hosea 11:1), and even His trip to the Temple when He was a baby (Luke 2:25–35; Isa. 40:5; 52:10).

God also allowed others to control the circumstances of His *death*—like the fact that the soldiers would gamble for His clothing (John 19:24; Psalm 22:18), that His bones—contrary to common practice—would remain unbroken (John 19:31–34; Ex. 12:46; Psalm 34:20), and that His lifeless body would be buried in a rich man's tomb (Matt. 27:57–61; Isa. 53:9). None of these were factors that a mortal man could have controlled once he had been condemned and transferred to Roman custody.

*To be continued in the next issue*



*Dr. Gary Hedrick is president and CEO of CJF Ministries in San Antonio, TX.*

# Bible Questions & Answers

by DR. GARY HEDRICK

## Have a Bible question?

Submit it to Dr. Hedrick at [garyh@cjfm.org](mailto:garyh@cjfm.org), or mail it to 611 Broadway, San Antonio, Texas 78215.

You may see your question addressed in a future issue of *Messianic Perspectives*.

**QUESTION:** *As far as we know, Jesus never said anything about the Rapture. If the Rapture is a biblical teaching, doesn't it seem like He would have mentioned it at least once?*

**ANSWER:** Are you sure He didn't? Let's take a look at John, Chapter 11. The setting here is that Yeshua's friend, Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha of Bethany, had fallen seriously ill and died four days earlier (v. 39). Some of the Lord's followers are frustrated because He took His time getting to Bethany. When He finally arrives, Mary registers her displeasure very bluntly: "Lord, if You had been here [sooner], my brother would not have died" (v. 32).

Then we read, *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"* (John 11:25–26, emphasis added).

Here's a literal translation of that middle phrase: "And all who are living and are believing in Me shall not die forever."

If you know some Greek and would like to check it out for yourself, here's the passage in question: *kai pas ho zōn kai pisteuōn eis eme ou me apothane eis ton aiōna (kai pās ὁ ζῶν καὶ πιστεύων εἰς ἐμὲ οὐ μὴ ἀποθάνῃ εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα).*

The *Amplified Bible* renders it, "And whoever continues to live and [believes in, has faith in, cleaves to, and relies on] Me shall never [actually] die at all."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Amplified Bible* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1987), John 11:26.

The Lord, then, is comforting His friend Martha, whose heart has been broken by her brother's untimely death. He reminds her that He is "the resurrection and the life." So, what does that mean?

Well, it means two different things for two different classes of believers. First, for those who have lived and died over the past two thousand years, it means they will be resurrected from the dead to live again: "He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live."

However, those who are alive when the Lord returns will be raptured (lit., "caught up") without ever experiencing physical death, so no resurrection will be required for them: "Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die."

Paul was talking about this second group of believers in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, where he said, *Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.*

These two verses in John 11, then, may indeed be an instance of Yeshua talking about the Rapture. Such an interpretation is certainly in keeping with the plain meaning of the text itself, as well as its context (i.e., the end-time resurrection of God's people). Whether Mary understood the full import of the phrase, however, or even if she had any idea about the Rapture, is another question. The Rapture is primarily a Pauline, church-related revelation and didn't relate to the Lord's immediate, first-century audience, the lost sheep of the House of Israel (Matt. 15:24). 🙏

## TWO CLASSES OF BELIEVERS

*Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"* (John 11:25–26).

**Class #1:** Those believers who have lived and died over the past two thousand years will be resurrected from the dead to live again: "He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live."

**Class #2:** Those believers who are alive when the Lord returns will be raptured ("caught up") without ever having experienced physical death: "Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die."

# Fruit from the Harvest



by Violette Berger



## Haredi Ministry

**Diann Parkas, CJFM representative (New Jersey)**, is involved, along with other volunteers, in building a resource network of support for the Haredim (the ultra-Orthodox) who leave their community. The network is made up of believing Christians with different skill sets who are trained and positioned to serve the Haredim. Recently, God brought them a young woman who left the community but needs support as she navigates her new world. Diann writes: “She has many needs, but she is also searching for community and for spiritual answers. Please pray for ‘S’ and for the woman on our team who has committed to mentoring and guiding her with the help she is seeking. One amazing way God enabled us to assist her was through her need for a computer. We posted this need on a private FaceBook page, and within a couple of weeks, she had a computer donated by someone in our network who read the post!” Diann asks for prayer, God’s wisdom, and guidance as they serve the Lord in this unique ministry.

## Prayers for Israel

**Yossi Ovadia, CJFM representative and pastor of Kehilat HaDerech Congregation (Israel)**, writes to thank everyone who is praying for them and supporting them during this time of turmoil. He adds, “Our country was surprised and shocked by the devastating attack on October 7, but we know God is in control. Even in this time of sorrow and death, we had four ladies who gave birth to healthy children since the beginning of the war. Praise God, and we expect another one to be born soon. A few months ago, our young adult group, including some of our soldiers, went on a trip to the Negev Desert. It was a time of refreshing, focusing, and trusting in God’s purposes. Our congregation presently has 13 soldiers serving in Gaza and on the borders of Lebanon and Syria.” (Two of the soldiers are Pastor Yossi’s sons.) He asks that we please pray for wisdom, strength, and protection so that the soldiers can accomplish what is required of them. Pray also for “E,” one of their soldiers who was wounded, and for the “B” family who is mourning the loss of their son, a fallen soldier.

Pastor Yossi continues: “The threat in the north is potentially far more dangerous; 60,000 people have been evacuated from their homes along the Lebanese border and have been displaced for seven months already. Two families from our congregation were also displaced when a rocket hit one of their homes.” Please pray for wisdom in running the congregation, as some key leaders are serving in the military. He also asks for prayer for the terrible wave of antisemitism that has swept across the world, that it would cause many Jewish individuals from all over the world to come to Israel in fulfillment of prophecy, and for the salvation of Gazans, that they may stand up against Hamas and bring about a change for good. Pastor Yossi concludes: “God brought us to this land from all corners of the earth, and here, the God of the Covenant promised to give us a new heart and a new spirit. God raised our nation from the ashes, brought us to the land of Israel, and we pray that He will soon remove the veil from the eyes of His people so that they will know Him (Ezekiel 36:24-26).”

## All Things Are Possible

**Marcos Morales, CJFM representative (Argentina)**, praises God that he had another opportunity to have a serious conversation about the Lord with a long-time Jewish friend, “E.” The two spoke of the recent solar eclipse, the apocalyptic speculations surrounding it, and the forecasts that went viral on social networks. He also raised the issue of the confrontation between Iran and Israel. E asked about their relationship to biblical prophecies in both the Tanakh and the New Testament, especially the Book of Revelation. Marcos writes: “I explained to him Psalm 83, Ezekiel 38-39, and Revelation 16:12-16. E is a mathematician and retired university professor. He is from a Sephardic family, and his grandparents and parents were pioneer founders of the Sephardic synagogue in our province. E is one of our oldest and most special friends. Deborah and I have shared the Word of God with him on many different occasions over the years. We think he believes in Yeshua but that it is somehow difficult for him to take a step of faith toward a life consecrated to the Messiah of Israel. I also showed E the biblical passages about the Time of Jacob’s Trouble and the Great Tribulation in the last days, which led to a discussion about the Messiah, whom the Jewish people are still waiting for. We spoke again about Yeshua as the Messiah who will reign and as a personal Savior—that the time of salvation is now. E paid much attention to this conversation and thought about it for a few days. He then phoned to tell me that he sees what I showed him in both the Tanakh and the New Testament, as well as how it made sense to him—and then he expressed his personal doubts to me.”

Carlos adds, “We are sure that the One who has begun the good work in E will perfect it until he has a personal encounter with Yeshua HaMashiach. Please pray with us for E, that the Lord Yeshua works in him for salvation and eternal life.”

## A Seed Planted

**Rob Styler, CJFM Director of Missions (Arizona)**, writes about an encounter on one of his daily walks in his neighborhood. As usual, he says “Hi” to all the other walkers he encounters. He similarly greeted a person he has seen over the past eight years. However, this time, noticing his tee shirt, she stopped to talk. Rob shares their conversation: “I noticed you’re wearing an IDF tee shirt (Israel Defense Force). She asked if I had been to Israel, and I told her I had and was looking forward to returning. That started a discussion on the difficulty the nation is facing, the hostages, and the rise of antisemitism. I told her that I am a strong supporter of the nation and the people. I mentioned a few projects we at CJFM have been involved in since October 7. I shared that the founder of our mission was a Jewish man who came to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. I also told her that I speak at my home church about the recent issues as well as about the Jewish holidays. Referring to herself, she said, ‘We are a Jewish family. I am so glad people like you are standing behind us.’ We went on our way, saying we would speak again.” Rob asks that we pray for his neighbor and recommends that we wear an Israeli tee shirt or a star of David, adding, “It’s the least we can do!”

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