

ISAIAH'S SUFFERING SERVANT: A NEW VIEW

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Recent history enables us to understand in a new way Isaiah's famous passage about God's servant whose tragic suffering can be redemptive to those who once reviled and belittled him (Isa. 52:13-53:12). On August 30, 2008 the Prime Minister of Italy signed an agreement to pay five billion dollars in reparations to Libya (\$200 million annually over the next 25 years). The precedent set by Germany over 55 years earlier, when it agreed, despite Arab boycott threats, to pay Israel reparations for property looted from German Jews during Nazi rule, has finally been applied to a European colonial state. Who, in the past, would ever have thought such an event would occur? The prophet Isaiah did.

The Nuremberg War Crimes Trials that followed World War II set a pattern for later trials of Cambodian, Serb, and Hutu mass murderers by international courts. When the German government decided in the early 1950s to pay reparations for property losses to German Jews who were still alive, and to the State of Israel for property losses of German Jews who died in the Holocaust, it was the first time an oppressor had voluntarily accepted responsibility for acts of oppression against another people. Who could ever predict that something like this could happen? The prophet Isaiah did.

WHO IS GOD'S SERVANT?

In Jewish thought the prophet Isaiah (52:13-53:12) provides the strongest evidence for the claim that the suffering yet redemptive servant is Israel, the Jewish People. Several verses in prior chapters of Isaiah specifically state that Israel/Jacob is God's servant.

You Israel are My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen (41:8).

Hear Me now, Jacob My servant; hear Me, Israel My chosen (44:1). Have no fear, Jacob My servant: Jeshurun whom I have chosen (44:2).

Remember all this, Jacob, remember Israel, for you are My servant (44:21).

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These verses make it clear that Israel/Jacob is God's chosen servant. The national community is spoken of in terms of an individual, as is often the case in the Bible (see Jer. 30:10).

However, many rabbis did identify Isaiah's messianic figure as a person, usually as a Messiah, a descendant of David, from the tribe of Judah. Other rabbis had other interpretations. Sa'adyah Ga'on glosses the figure as referring to the Prophet Jeremiah. Isaac Abarbanel rejects that and thinks the suffering servant is Josiah, King of Israel. I think this individual is a messianic figure called by the rabbis *mashiah ben Yosef* (Messiah, son of Joseph), that is, from one of the northern tribes, who precedes David's son, and is killed in battle by the enemies of Israel. If we keep in mind both the *mashiah ben Yosef* as well as the role of Israel/Jacob as God's chosen servant, we will understand Isaiah's suffering servant prophecy. The belief that there would be two different messiahs, one a moral political leader from the house of David and the other a religious reformer from the house of Aaron, as well as a special "end of days" prophet such as Elijah or Jeremiah (Matthew 16:14) is found in inter-testament literature. A Dead Sea scroll states that the Qumran community must continue to live according to the original discipline "until there shall come a prophet and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel" (Manuel of Discipline 9:11).

There is also a rabbinic belief in a messianic figure from the northern tribes called a *mashiah ben Yosef* who is killed by Israel's enemies. This idea may be modeled on the example of Saul, who reigned before David and was killed in battle by the enemies of Israel. Thus there could be as many as four individual messianic figures as well as the people of Israel who act as God's agents in bringing about the Messianic Age. Gentile rulers also play a role, first as destructive oppressors of the Jewish people, and second, when they later acknowledge their error and are ultimately included in helping bring about the Messianic Age's worldwide blessings. Cyrus was such a Messiah (Isa. 45:1).

All of this makes for a complicated future scenario that might take generations, or even centuries, to develop. When people are persecuted, afflicted, and oppressed as a community, and despised and rejected as individuals, they need hope for a much quicker and simpler process of redemption. This is why there is an overwhelming focus on the final-stage

son-of-David Messiah by most teachers, preachers, commentators, and expositors.

Also, since humans have free will, the exact time and manner of redemption cannot be determined in advance. Much depends on what we do. Repentance produces changes in the future of both individuals and nations. Repentance enables some individuals and communities to escape the consequences of prior evil. On the other hand, God's promise is that evil powers will never succeed in destroying Israel or in overcoming justice in the long run. Thus, even without full repentance, God will act if the Divine promise of a Messianic Age is threatened. Isaiah states a few verses prior to the suffering servant passage, *The Lord says: you were sold but no price was paid, and without payment you shall be redeemed (52:3)*, that is, all your suffering in exile was not really merited and your redemption from exile will not really be fully earned. Both are part of God's outline for human destiny and will occur sooner (through repentance) or later (in God's own time).

Finally, if one believes that God-inspired prophets are able to describe scenarios of various developments in the distant future, then one has to accept the idea that the understanding of these passages should change and improve as we come closer and closer to the times they describe. For example, Jeremiah describes a radical future in which women surround men, *The Lord will create a new thing on earth – a woman will surround a man (31:22)*. The great commentator Rashi understands 'surround' to mean encircle. The most radical thing Rashi can think of (and, in 11th-century France, it *was* radical) is that women will propose marriage (a wedding ring, or the encircling of the groom in the wedding ceremony) to men. In today's feminist generation, we can see women surrounding men in fields once almost exclusively male, such as law, medical, and rabbinical schools. Of course, this means that a few generations from now, we might have an even better understanding of some predictive passages in the prophets, so humility should always be with us.

Now let us try for a new understanding of the Suffering Servant passage in light of 20th-century Jewish history. Isaiah proclaims the good news of peace and salvation (52:7) when God returns to Zion (8) and comforts His people (9) so all the Gentiles can see this salvation (10). The Jewish people will depart from the exile not in flight but under God's protection (52:11, 12). Israel/Jacob, God's servant, whose appearance (14) was disfigured, marred,

and appalling (during the Holocaust) will prosper (13) and be lifted up (in subsequent generations). A marvel for many nations, whose rulers will shut their (anti-Semitic) mouths because of this, since they will see what they had not been taught and will understand what they never heard of (15). For centuries, the Church taught that the Jews were being punished for rejecting Jesus and could not be redeemed without believing Jesus was the Son of God. Now some Gentile rulers see that this teaching is false. The biblical message of God's commitment to redeem Israel without their believing in Jesus was not believed (53:1), but now there is a growing minority who affirm a two-covenant theology.

Many Gentile rulers (kings, governments, business and religious leaders) now admit what their anti-Semitism did to the people of Israel. The Jews were like a tender shoot in dry ground, unattractive and undesirable, despised and rejected, sorrowful and familiar (intimate) with suffering (53:2,3). We (the Gentile rulers) scapegoated them and they carried our projected infirmities, but we rationalized that the Jews were stricken and afflicted by God, not by us. Israel was pierced and crushed due to our transgressions (anti-Semitism), for we sought our peace by blaming Jews for all kinds of evils (53:4,5). This anti-Semitism led to Crusaders slaughtering Jews in France and Germany, the Jews being blamed for the bubonic plague in central Europe, torture by the officials of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition, many expulsions and pogroms at various times throughout Europe, and the deaths of tens of thousands of Jewish civilians massacred during wars in Poland (1648-9) and the Ukraine (1919-21). All this set the stage for the worst martyrdom of all, the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust (plus five million non-Jews). Each evil regime directed its own kind of iniquity (religious, political, economic and/or social) on its Jews (53:6).

Again and again Jews were passively taken away to exile, or, like sheep to the slaughter, cut off from the land of the living, though they had committed no violent act (53:7-9). Faithful Jews accepted all this as God's will and refused to abandon their religion or their people. Survivors of the concentration camps who had lost their entire family had the courage and faith to marry, and they lived to see their offspring (Jewish children and grandchildren) grow up (53:10). Many, whose days were prolonged (53:10) and are now in their 70s and 80s, have lived long enough to see the most

amazing outcomes of the Holocaust. The return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel and the rebuilding of its cities and countryside are the subject of many passages in Isaiah both preceding Chapter 53 and following it. The realization of these prophecies did not require a Holocaust. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the mass departure of more than one million Soviet Jews to the land of Israel are also not directly linked to the Holocaust. But the redemptive aspect of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust for Gentile rulers and nations is emphasized in the Suffering Servant passage.

Over the past few decades there have been a number of amazing acts of public apology offered by religious and political leaders to groups that their churches and states had victimized. The Prime Minister of France finally apologized, 56 years after the end of WWII, for the collaboration of the Vichy French government in deporting French Jews to the death camps. A more recent example is Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt, who, in May of 2007, apologized for his country's deportation of Jews to Nazi death camps during WWII: "Only by recognizing the responsibility of the authorities at the time can we build a future where this will never happen again,"

When the Pope and several Protestant denominations began to atone for previous centuries of anti-Semitism in the 1970s and 1980s, a rising awareness of the Holocaust began to generate a wider spiritual consciousness in the West. The American government finally made a token payment to the Japanese interned in American concentration camps during WWII. In 1993, President Clinton signed into law a resolution stating, "Congress apologizes to the native Hawaiians on behalf of the people of the United States for the overthrow of their independent government." The Pope expressed sorrow over the evils committed when Europeans conquered North and South America. More recently (in 2005), the great majority of U.S senators officially expressed sorrow over the many times the Senate refused to pass federal anti-lynching laws (over 4,000 men – 70 percent of them black – were lynched in the United States). In February of 2006, two centuries after profiting from the venture, the Church of England has apologized for its role in the global slave trade, which included running a Caribbean island sugar plantation and branding the blacks who worked it. In 2007, the Virginia House of Delegates unanimously approved a resolution expressing "profound

regret for the commonwealth's role in sanctioning the immoral institution of human slavery." That same year, the legislature of the State of Alabama passed a resolution expressing "profound regret" for the state's enslavement of black people. Alabama was the fourth southern state to formally apologize for slavery.

Another recent example of a government publicly admitting crimes of previous generations was the Australian Prime Minister's apology to the country's aborigines for laws and policies that "inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss" on them. He singled out the Stolen Generations of thousands of children forcibly removed from their families. The apology, beamed live around the country on television, was met with cheers. A similar apology was offered by the Prime Minister of Canada in June of 2008 to the 150,000 aborigines who were forcibly taken from their parents and sent away to 130 residential schools whose mission was to "Christianize and civilize" them. The shift in the government's policy resulted from a major change in the churches that ran most of the schools. The United Church was one of the first to withdraw from the schools in 1969, and in 1986 was the first of the churches to apologize. Between 1991 and 1996, a Roman Catholic order, the Anglican Church, and the Presbyterian Church also issued apologies. A \$1.9-billion compensation fund was created in 2006 when the federal government settled a lawsuit. Every student will get some money and those who were sexually abused will receive higher amounts. In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI told Australians he was deeply sorry for the sexual abuse of children by some Catholic priests. Everyone who knows modern history will realize that such acts of atonement by the ruling political and religious authorities would have been unbelievable to every generation prior to the Holocaust.

Of course, the Turkish government still denies responsibility for the death of over one million Armenians; the Japanese deny slaughtering 300,000 residents of Nanking, and only a few French leaders admit to the complicity of the Vichy government in rounding up Jews for the Nazi death camps. Even the United Nations has not officially admitted its dereliction of duty in the genocide of 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda. Yet the many steps of public confession and atonement that have been taken by some political and religious leaders are truly remarkable when you consider that nothing like this has ever happened in previous human history. If the

Holocaust has stimulated religious and political leaders to accept responsibility for past examples of persecution and iniquity done by their institutions and governments and if this trend continues to spread, that will reduce the likelihood of repetition. Then the numbering of God's innocent servant – Israel/Jacob – with transgressors will, when the lessons are finally learned, justify not just those directly involved in the atonement process but also many others. Israel's pouring out of life (six million deaths) will not have been in vain, and the revived Jewish people will see the light of life and be satisfied (53:11-12).

The *mashiah ben David* will come after all nations, religions and political parties learn to respect and value as a gift from God each other's right to differ in large as well as minor issues. Since this religious reform requires inspired leadership from all the major religions, each religion will have to produce its own son-of-Aaron religious reformer messianic figure. These plural messianic religious reformers are referred to by Jeremiah as *shepherds* (3:14-18) and their teachings will provide each religion with a reformed and renewed covenant (31:31-34). The advocacy of pluralism by the major religious communities will then produce the bases for the ultimate messianic predictions of worldwide peace, justice, prosperity, and salvation that the prophets proclaimed so often. Then *mashiah ben David* will come to crown our faith in God's deliverance.