

## **JESUS WAS NOT THE "SUFFERING SERVANT" OF ISAIAH 53 [1]**

**ISSUES:** Christian missionaries are very attracted to the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah's book because it refers to the "affliction, oppression, and persecution of a suffering servant who submitted to his grave." Superficially, Isaiah's description sounds enticingly like the Christian view of Jesus. However, Chapter fifty-three is part of Isaiah's fourth servant song, which does not refer to the Messiah ben David; it refers to a "suffering servant of God." God chose the Jewish People to be His servant nation and historically it is the Jewish People who have suffered at the hands of the Gentile nations. Gentile means "the nations." The Jewish People are the suffering servant of God. This chapter can only be understood if the reader understands who is speaking. The speaker throughout chapter fifty-three are the Gentile kings who are introduced at the end of Chapter 52 who remark in shock and astonishment at the sudden elevation of the Jewish People. The Christian Church has always taught that the Jews have suffered for the past 2000 years as a punishment for rejecting Jesus, but in Chapter 52 God reveals and these **Gentile kings** admit that the **Gentiles** caused the Jews to suffer for their own sins:

**ISAIAH 52:** "Behold, My [God's] servant [Israel] will succeed; he [Israel] will be exalted and become high and exceedingly lofty. Just as multitudes were astonished over you [Israel] ...so will the **many nations** [exclaim about him [Israel] and [Gentile] **kings will shut their mouths** [in amazement] for **they** [Gentiles] will see that which had never been told to **them** [Gentiles], and will perceive things **they** (Gentiles) had never heard." (Isaiah 52:15)

**CONCLUSION:** In Isaiah 52, the Gentile kings "shut their mouths" when they realize that they sinned by persecuting the Jews for their own benefit. They are the speaker in chapter 53. Once this is understood, Isaiah's 53rd chapter becomes clear. Remember that in Chapter 53, the "we" are these Gentiles and the "he" is Israel (the Jewish People). This is the correct translation from the Hebrew:

**ISAIAH 53:** "Who would believe what we [**Gentiles**] have heard! For whom has the arm of Hashem been revealed! Formerly he [**Israel**] grew like a sapling or like a root from arid ground; he had neither form nor grandeur; we saw him but without such visage that we could desire him. He was despised and isolated from men, a man of pains and accustomed to illness. As one from whom we would hide our faces; he was despised, and we had no regard for him. But in truth, it was our ills that he bore, and our pains that he carried – but we had regarded him diseased, stricken by God, and afflicted. He was pained because of our rebellious sins and oppressed through our iniquities; the chastisement upon him was for our benefit, and through his wounds, we were healed. We have all strayed like sheep, each of us turning his own way, and Hashem inflicted upon him the iniquity of us all. He was persecuted and afflicted, but he did not open his mouth; like a sheep being led to the slaughter or a ewe that is silent before her shearers, he did not open his mouth. Now that he has been released from captivity and judgment, who could have imagined such a generation? For he had been removed from the land of the living, an affliction upon **them** [lamo in Hebrew] that was my people's sin. He submitted himself to his grave like wicked men; and the wealthy [submitted] to his execution, for committing no crime and with no deceit in his mouth.

Hashem desired to oppress him and He afflicted him; if his soul would acknowledge guilt, he would see offspring and live long days and the desire of Hashem would succeed in his hand. He would see (the purpose) and be satisfied with his soul's distress. With his knowledge My servant will vindicate the Righteous One to multitudes; it is their iniquities that he will carry. Therefore, I will assign him a portion from the multitudes and he will divide the mighty as spoils – in return for having poured out his soul for death and being counted among the wicked, for he bore the sin of the multitudes, and prayed for the wicked.”

These verses will be analyzed in detail below.

**JACOB AND ISRAEL ARE REFERENCES TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE:** According to Genesis, the Jewish patriarch Jacob's name was changed to Israel. Collectively, Jacob and Israel refer to the Jewish People:

**GENESIS:** “He [an angel] said, “No longer will it be said that your name is Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with the Divine and with man and have overcome.” (Genesis 32:29)

**ISRAEL IS GOD'S SERVANT NATION:** Isaiah identified the “servant” as Jacob and Israel (the Jewish People) many times in the twelve chapters preceding his 53rd chapter:

1. “But you, Israel, are my **servant, Jacob** whom I have chosen.” (Isaiah 41:8-9)
2. “Yet hear now, O **Jacob My servant and Israel** whom I have chosen.” (Isaiah 44:1)
3. “Remember these, **O Jacob, And Israel, for you are My servant**, I have formed you,  
you are My servant.” (Isaiah 44:21)
4. “...for **Jacob My servant's sake, and Israel** My elect.” (Isaiah 45:4)
5. “The Lord has redeemed His **servant Jacob**.” (Isaiah 48:20)
6. “You are My **servant, O Israel**, in whom I will be glorified.” (Isaiah 49:3)

**ANALYSIS:** The idea that the servant is the Jewish people in Chapters 41 through 49, and that Isaiah would suddenly turn the servant into the messiah in Chapter 53 without warning defies logic. Missionaries attempt to benefit from the fact that Isaiah had explained who the “servant” was so many times by the times he reached Chapter 53 he did not bother to do so again.

**FURTHER PROOF:** In the Jewish Bible Israel and Jacob are often referred to as God's “servant.”

1. “A heritage to **Israel His servant**, for His mercy endures forever.” (Psalm 136:22)

2. “But do not fear, O **My servant Jacob**, and do not be dismayed, **O Israel!** (Jeremiah 46:27)
3. “Do not fear, **O’ Jacob My servant**, says the Lord, for I am with you for I will make a complete end of all the nations.” (Jeremiah 76: 28)
4. “Therefore do not fear, O **My servant Jacob**, says the Lord, nor be dismayed, **O Israel**, for behold, I will save you from afar, and your seed [zera] from the land of their captivity, Jacob shall return, have rest and be quiet.” (Jeremiah 30:10)

Israel is also referred to as God’s servant in the **Christian Bible**:

5. “He [God] has helped **His servant Israel** in remembrance of His mercy.” (Luke 1:54)

**THE CHRISTIAN VIEW REQUIRES GOD TO BE HIS OWN SERVANT:** The Christian view is that the suffering servant of God described in Isaiah 53 is Jesus. However, Christians also assert that Jesus is a part of the “trinity,” one of the three persons in the Christian triune godhead, and therefore is God Himself. Therefore, according to the Christian view, God sent Himself as His own “suffering servant.” This does not make sense logically and is contrary to the plain meaning of the text. Logically and in context, a servant and the servant’s master are not the same person.

**CAN “HE” REFER TO ISRAEL?** Christian missionaries claim that since the "servant" is referred to as "he" (singular, masculine) Chapter 53 cannot refer to Israel. However, the verses below demonstrate that the Jewish Bible specifically refers to Israel as “he, him, his servant and God’s son,” in the singular, masculine.

1. **EXODUS:** “You shall say to Pharaoh, ‘So said Hashem, My **firstborn son is Israel**. So I say to you, send out **My son** that **he** may serve Me – but you have refused to send **him** out: behold, I shall kill your firstborn son.” (Exodus 4:22) Israel is referred to as God’s “**son**” and “**he**” in the collective.
2. **HOSEA:** The prophet Hosea said, “When Israel was a lad I loved **him**, and since Egypt I have been calling out to **My son**.” (Hosea 11:1)
3. **HOSEA:** Hosea confirmed that in exile, Israel struggled as a young tree growing on parched land, “I will be as the dew unto **Israel**; **he** shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon. **His** branches shall spread, **his** beauty shall be as the olive tree, and **his** smell as Lebanon.” (Hosea 14:6-8)

**ANALYSIS:** This confirms the verse in Isaiah 53:2 which says “**he** came up like a sapling before it, and like a root from dry ground, **he** had neither form nor comeliness; and we saw **him** that he had no appearance that we should have desired **him**.”

**ISAIAH SHIFTED TO THE PLURAL:** Isaiah himself proves the Jewish understanding is correct by switching back from the masculine singular (**he**) to the plural form (**them**) when referring to the Jewish People in verse 53:8. Isaiah said:

“Now that **he** [Israel] has been released from captivity and judgment, who could have imagined such a generation? For **he** had been removed from the land of the living, an affliction upon **them** [lamo in Hebrew] that was my people’s sin.” (Isaiah 53:8, Jewish Bible, Stone Edition)

**ANALYSIS:** Isaiah’s switch from **him** to **them** (lamo) is a fatal problem for the Christian claim that it applies to one man, Jesus. Christian missionaries can plausibly claim that “he” applies to Jesus but they cannot plausibly claim that “them” applies to Jesus. The New King James and the NIV versions of the Christian Bible dealt with this monumental problem by merely mistranslating “lamo” as him, fraudulently translating the plural as the singular.

The prophet Hosea also described the Jewish People as “**lad**,” “**him**,” and “**son**” (singular masculine) and then switched to the plural **them** (lamo) in exactly the same way:

“When Israel was a **lad**, I loved **him**, and since Egypt I have been calling out to My **son**. [As much as] they called to **them**, [Israel] so did they [Ephraim] turn away from **them** [Israel]...” (Hosea 11:1-2)

**ANALYSIS:** Like the prophet Isaiah, the prophet Hosea also referred to Israel in the first person masculine as God’s child and God’s son. Hosea then switched to the plural, “them.” This confirms the Jewish understanding that the “he” in Isaiah 53 describes the Jewish People, God’s suffering servant.

**THEOLOGY BY BIBLE TAMPERING:** The New King James (NKJ) Christian translation of Isaiah 53 further manipulated the text in Isaiah 53:3-5 by changing the tense from past to present and by strategically mistranslating key words and phrases in order to force Jesus into the text. The Jewish Bible correctly translates the Hebrew. The reader can compare this to the Christian translation:

**THE JEWISH BIBLE:** “...he had neither form nor grandeur...he was despised and isolated from men, a man of pains and accustomed to illness. As one from whom we would hide our faces; he was despised, and we had no regard for him. But in truth, it was our ills that he bore, and our pains that he carried-but we had regarded him diseased, stricken by God, and afflicted. He was pained because of our rebellious sins and oppressed through our iniquities...” (Isaiah 53:2-5)

**THE CHRISTIAN OLD TESTAMENT (NKJ):** “He has [instead of had] no form or comeliness...He is [instead of was] despised and rejected [instead of isolated] by men. A man of sorrows [instead of pains] and acquainted with grief [instead of accustomed to illness]. And we hid, as it were, our faces from him. Surely he has borne our griefs [instead of ills] and carried our sorrows; Yet we esteemed him stricken, [instead of diseased] smitten by God, and afflicted, but he was wounded for our transgressions. (Isaiah 53:2-5)

**ANALYSIS:** Isaiah referred to an event that had already occurred and therefore used the past tense. Christian translators manipulated the text by changing the tense to the present tense to apply it to Jesus. Christian translators avoided the

problem that Jesus never was reported to have suffered from “illness or disease” by mistranslating these words as “sorrows and grief.” This manipulation of the text shifted the meaning of Isaiah’s words to support Christian theology.

#### **ANALYSIS OF KEY VERSES:**

**ISAIAH 53:3:** “He [Israel] was despised and isolated from men, a man of pains and accustomed to illness [not grief]. As one from whom we would hide our faces; he was despised, and we had no regard for him.”

**ANALYSIS:** “He” [the Jewish People] was subjected to 2000 years of anti-Semitism, “despised,” and forced to live in walled ghettos in Europe “isolated from men” and “we “ [Gentiles] had no regard for “him” [the Jewish People].

**ISAIAH 53:4:** “But in truth, it was our ills that he bore, and our pains that he carried-but we had regarded him diseased, [not sorrows] stricken by God, and afflicted!”

**ANALYSIS:** The Gentiles admit that it was “our” [the Gentiles] “ills and pains” that “he” [the Jews] bore. The Gentiles regarded the Jews cursed by God and “diseased, stricken, and afflicted.” Clearly, Jesus was not “accustomed to illness, diseased, stricken or afflicted.”

**ISAIAH 53:5:** “He was pained because of our rebellious sins and oppressed through our iniquities; the chastisement upon him was for our benefit, and through his wounds, we were healed.”

**ANALYSIS:** “He” [the Jewish People] “was pained” [suffered] because of “our” [the Gentiles] rebellious sins and “he” [the Jewish People] was “oppressed” by “our” [the Gentiles] “iniquities” [sins]. The Gentiles believed that the suffering of the Jewish People was deserved because the Jews rejected and killed Jesus but his death redeemed their sins. “We” [the Gentiles] believed that they were “healed” [justified] “through his [the Jewish People’s] wounds” that the Gentiles inflicted upon the Jewish People.

**ISAIAH 53:6:** “We have all strayed like sheep, each of us turning his own way, and Hashem inflicted upon him the iniquity of us all.”

**ANALYSIS:** “We” [Gentiles] “strayed [from God] like sheep,” [by persecuting the Jewish People], and Hashem “inflicted upon him” [God’s servant nation] “the iniquity of us all” [that the Gentiles deserved].

**ISAIAH 53:7:** “He was persecuted and afflicted, but he did not open his mouth; like a sheep being led to the slaughter or a ewe that is silent before her shearers, he did not open his mouth.”

**ANALYSIS:** This verse refers to the many hardships that “he” [the Jewish People] endured in their exiles. For example, in the eleventh century, the Jewish People was “persecuted and afflicted” by crusaders who brutally tortured and killed Jews in the name of their lord Jesus. In this century the Nazis murdered millions of Jews in the death camps, “like a sheep being led to slaughter...like an

ewe that is silent before her shearers.” This verse cannot be about Jesus who “opened his mouth” on the cross to complain that God had forsaken him.[2]

**ISAIAH 53: 8:** “Now that he has been released from captivity and judgment, who could have imagined such a generation? For he had been removed from the land of the living, an affliction upon them that was my people’s sin.”

**ANALYSIS:** “He” [the Jews] had been "removed" [exiled] from the "land of the living" [Israel]. The Jews were afflicted and exiled to Babylonia. The Jews were afflicted and exiled from Spain. The Jews were afflicted and removed from Germany in boxcars and taken to death camps.

**ISAIAH 53:9:** “He submitted himself to his grave like wicked men; and the wealthy [submitted] to his executions, for committing no crime [NKJ and NIV Christian Bibles translates crime as violence] and with no deceit in his mouth.”

**ANALYSIS:** For one thousand years, European Christians killed wealthy Jews to steal their money who “submitted to execution, committing no crime” [although they were innocent]. “With no deceit in his [the Jewish People’s] mouth” [without pretending to accept Jesus] “he” [the Jewish People] submitted themselves to their grave.”

**THE SUFFERING SERVANT “HAD DONE NO VIOLENCE”** According to Isaiah the servant “**had done no violence.**”[3] This verse cannot possibly be about Jesus. With whip in hand Jesus attacked the merchants in the Temple area, overturning tables and seats.[4] He destroyed a fig tree for not having fruit out of season.[5] He caused the death, by drowning, of a herd of swine by allowing demons to purposely enter their bodies.[6] Attacking merchants, cursing and killing a fig tree, and permitting demons to enter the swineherd and causing their death is violent behavior. Whether Jesus was justified in this violence is irrelevant. Therefore, Jesus could not have been the subject of Isaiah 53:9.

**THE SERVANT HAD PHYSICAL DESCENDANTS:** Properly translated Isaiah 53:10 says, “**He** [the suffering servant] **would see offspring.**”[7] The Hebrew word for “offspring” (**zera**) literally means **sperm**. As one would expect, “zera” is always used in the Jewish Bible to denote **physical** descendants. There is no indication in the Christian Bible that Jesus left physical descendants, (offspring) and therefore, Isaiah 53 cannot possibly be about him. In the Jewish Bible when spiritual descendants are intended, the Hebrew word “ben,” which means “sons” is always used.

**THE SERVANT HAD A PROLONGED LIFE:** Isaiah said the servant “...[would] **live long days...**”[8] According to the Christian NKJ and the NIV translations [God] will “**prolong his days.**” “Prolonged days” means a long life, which cannot possibly apply to Jesus. Jesus allegedly died at about 30 years of age, which is not a “prolonged” life. Also, if Jesus was “god” as Christians claim, he was in essence an eternal (not mortal) being whose life could not have been “prolonged.” Although this description cannot fit Jesus, it does fit the Jewish People perfectly, whose physical survival notwithstanding millenniums of persecution is legendary in the face of overwhelming odds against survival. Significantly, the Jewish People are the **only** biblical people that have survived to the modern era as a distinct people. The days of the **physical descendants**

of the Jewish People have truly and miraculously been “**prolonged**” for 3200 years and have fulfilled this prophecy and every other prophecy in Isaiah 53.

**CONCLUSION:** God’s servant nation was referred to as Jacob/Israel many times in the twelve chapters preceding Chapter fifty-three of Isaiah. The Christian Bible also refers to Israel as God’s servant. The Jewish servant nation is referred to in the singular as “he” in Isaiah, Exodus, and Hosea. According to the Christian theory of the trinity, Jesus was God. Logically, God cannot be His own servant. The Christian Bible changed tense, mistranslated the plural (lamo) as singular and falsely capitalized pronouns. The suffering servant “did no violence” and Jesus committed several acts of violence. Isaiah’s servant had physical descendants and a prolonged life, which cannot apply to Jesus.

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[1] Source: *Lets Get Biblical* by Rabbi Tovia Singer

[2] Mark 15:34, Matthew 27:46

[3] Isaiah 53:9 New King James and NIV translations

[4] Matthew 21:12, Mark 11:15-16, Luke 19:45, John 2:15

[5] Matthew 21:18-21, Mark 11:13-14

[6] Matthew 8:32, Mark 5:13, Luke 8:33

[7] Isaiah 53:10, Jewish Bible, Stone Edition

[8] Ibid

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A Christian response to Asher Norman’s claims on

## I s a i a h 5 3\*

Who would have believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed? For he grew up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground (יָאֵזֶר אֶעֱיֵשׁוּׁם): he had no form or comeliness, that we should look at him, and no countenance, that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected of men; a man of pains and acquainted with sickness: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. But in truth he has borne our sickness and endured our pains; yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded because of our transgressions, bruised because of our iniquities: his suffering were that we might have peace, and by his injury we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all (כָּלֵנוּ אֵיִשָּׁא אֵלָיו) to fall on him. He was oppressed, but he humbled himself and opened not his mouth: as a lamb which is brought to the slaughter, and a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and false judgment he was taken away; and of his generation who considered? For he was cut off from the land of the living, for the transgression of the people to whom the stroke was due. For he made his grave among the wicked, and his tomb among the rich; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth. But it pleased the LORD to crush him by disease: if his soul shall consider it a recompense for guilt, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the purpose of the LORD shall prosper in his hand ....

Isaiah 53:1-10, Jerusalem Bible, Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd., 1998

In an Appendix to his book *Twenty-six reasons why Jews don't believe in Jesus*, Asher Norman sets out to give 'nine examples of the three hundred false messianic prophecies used in the Christian Bible'.<sup>[1]</sup> Foremost among these is Isaiah's well-known portrait of the suffering servant who dies as an atonement for sin.

Norman's principal claims on this passage are that -

- Christians have erred by applying these prophecies to the Messiah
- the *suffering servant* of Isaiah 53 and the *servant* through-out Isaiah's prophecies is the Jews (Israel as a nation)
- Christian translations have distorted the text to support their own interpretation.

While a reader may at first be convinced by some of Norman's arguments, Solomon said in his wisdom: *The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him* (Proverbs 18:17).

In order to remain persuasive, Norman's arguments have to stand up to scrutiny. This critique is prepared for the benefit of those who have read *Twenty-six reasons*. May the truth be found by all who desire it.

We deal successively with each of Norman's principal claims:

### Have Christians erred by applying Isaiah 53 to Messiah?

Norman suggests that the Christian understanding of Isaiah 53 is untenable, but neglects to mention to his readers that Judaism also believes in a suffering Messiah who will be pierced for the sins of Israel. Norman also fails to mention that certain Jewish authorities also apply Isaiah 53 to the Messiah.

We refer Norman's readers to a number of well-known examples.

The Talmud at *Sukkat* 52a, refers to a prophecy from Zechariah 12:10 - *They will look on Me, whom they have pierced, and they will mourn for Him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for Him as one grieves for a firstborn son* - followed by this interpretation:

It is well according to him who explains that the cause [of the mourning] is the slaying of the Messiah the son of Joseph, since that well agrees with the Scripture verse: 'And they shall look upon me, whom they have pierced: and shall mourn for him, as one mourns for his only son.'

Chapter 36 of the *Pesiqta Rabbati* (Friedmann, ed.) speaks of Israel's true Messiah as the one who suffers willingly to obtain for Israel its promised inheritance in eternity:

The Fathers of the World [Abraham, Isaac and Jacob] will in the future rise up in the month of Nissan and will speak to him: "Ephraim, our true Messiah! Even though we are your fathers, you are greater than we, for you suffered because of the sins of our children, and cruel punishments have come upon you the like of which have not come upon the early and the later generations, and you were put to ridicule and held in contempt by the nations of the world because of Israel, and you sat in darkness and blackness and your eyes saw no light, and your skin cleft to your bones, and your body dried up like wood, and your eyes grew dim from fasting, and your strength became like a potsherd. All this because of the sins of our children! Do you want that our children should enjoy the happiness that the Holy One, blessed be He,

allotted to Israel, or perhaps, because of the great sufferings that have come upon you on their account, and because they imprisoned you in the jailhouse, [be it that] your mind is not reconciled to them?

And the Messiah answers them: "Fathers of the World. Everything I did, I did only for you and for your children, and for your honour and for the honour of your children, so that they should enjoy this happiness that the Holy One, blessed be He, has allotted to Israel."

The *Zohar* cites Isaiah 53 with reference to Messiah.

Messiah lifts up his voice and weeps over those sinful among them. This is what is written: *He was wounded because of our transgression, he was crushed because of our iniquities* (Isaiah 53:5) ... In the Garden of Eden there is a hall which is called the Hall of the Sons of Illness. The Messiah enters that hall and summons all the diseases and the pains and all the sufferings of Israel that they should come upon him, and all of them come upon him ... As long as Israel dwelt in the Holy Land, the rituals and the sacrifices they performed [in the Temple] removed all those diseases from the world; now the Messiah removes them from the children of the world .... (Zohar 2:212a)

The *Midrash Kohen* speaks of Messiah as the one who suffers for the sins of Israel and applies Isaiah 53 specifically to him.

Elijah of blessed memory says to him [Messiah]: "Endure the suffering and the sentence of your Master who makes you suffer because of the sin of Israel." And thus it is written: *He was wounded because of our transgression, he was crushed because of our iniquities* - until the time when the end comes.<sup>[2]</sup>

Isaiah 53 seems to be a poor example of Norman's "three hundred false messianic prophesies contained in the Christian Bible"?<sup>[3]</sup>

**Could the Jewish people (Israel as a nation) be the suffering servant of Isaiah 53?**

Norman contends that "the Jewish people are the suffering servant of God" and that Isaiah 53 speaks of the nation of Israel.<sup>[4]</sup> In support of this idea he suggests that:

(1) 'servant' in chapters 41 - 52 of Isaiah refers exclusively to the Jews -

Isaiah identified the 'servant' as Jacob and Israel ... the idea that the servant is the Jewish people in Chapters 41 through 49, and that Isaiah would suddenly turn the servant into the Messiah in Chapter 53 without warning defies logic.<sup>[5]</sup>

(2) the speakers (i.e. first person plural) in chapter 53 are the Gentile kings referred to in chapter 52 -

... the speakers though-out Chapter 53 are the Gentile kings introduced at the end of chapter 52.<sup>[6]</sup>

Remember that in Chapter 53, the "we" are these Gentiles and the "he" is Israel (the Jewish People).<sup>[7]</sup>

(3) God chose the Jewish people to be his servant nation.

Response to point (1)

As in the case of chapter 53, Norman ignores the fact that Jewish authorities have applied several of the servant references of the earlier chapters of Isaiah to Messiah. The table contains examples.

<i>Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.</i> (Isaiah 42:1)	The <i>Targum (mikroath gedoloth)</i> ascribes this verse to Messiah, and so does the <i>Midrash</i> on Psalm 2, and <i>Yalkut 2</i> , p.104d.
<i>You are my witnesses, declares the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen</i> (Isaiah 43:10a)	The <i>Targum</i> renders "my servant" in this verse as "my servant the Messiah"
<i>See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.</i> (Isaiah 52:13)	The <i>Targum</i> applies this to Messiah. So does <i>Yalkut 2</i> , paragraph 338, p.53c.
<i>by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities</i> (Isaiah 53:11b)	The Talmud, Tractate <i>Sanhedrin</i> 98b, derives the messianic title "Leprous" or "Diseased" from the description of Messiah in these verses.

Response to point (2)

If the speakers in Isaiah 53 are the Gentile kings, and Israel is the suffering servant, it means, as Norman says, that every occurrence of "we" and "our" in that chapter is a reference to the Gentiles, and every occurrence of "he" and "his" is a reference to the Jewish people. Thus -

- *the Jews were pained because of the rebellious sins of the Gentiles and oppressed because of the iniquities of the Gentiles and by the wounds of the Jews, we, the Gentiles, are healed* (Isaiah 53:5, according to Norman's interpretation <sup>[8]</sup>)
- *we, the Gentiles, have all strayed from God like sheep ... and Hashem inflicted upon the Jewish people the iniquity that we, the Gentiles, deserved* (Isaiah 53:6, according to Norman's interpretation <sup>[9]</sup>)

While this would be truly magnanimous, such an undertaking by the Jews on behalf of their Gentile brethren has no basis in Scripture or in history.

In terms of the Sinai Covenant, God would punish the Jews for their own sins, not the sins of others (see Deuteronomy 28, verse 15 and further).

History affirms that Judah and Israel were sent into exile exactly as Hashem had warned through Isaiah and the other prophets (see 2 Chronicles 36:15-21). This was done as the punishment for its own sins (see Daniel 9:4-14).

Where the Law of Moses permits vicarious atonement, it is always for those in covenant relationship with God (namely, Israel) and always requires the substitution of a guiltless victim for the sinner. The Jews were not guiltless, but even more sinful than the Gentiles (Ezekiel 5:7) and equally in need of an atonement (Ezekiel 16:63).

The *suffering servant* of Isaiah 53 is taken away *by oppression and false judgment* (verse 8), not as the consequence of his own sin. He *had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth* (verse 9), whereas Hashem accused the Jewish people: *your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters wicked things* (Isaiah 59:3).

We must thus conclude that Norman's idea that the Jews are the *suffering servant* and the Gentile nations the beneficiary of their suffering is untenable, being incongruous with both Scripture and history.

### What is spoken of in Isaiah 52?

Norman refers his readers to the passage commencing at verse 13 of Isaiah 52:

See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him -  
his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man  
and his form marred beyond human likeness -  
so will he sprinkle many nations,  
and kings will shut their mouths because of him.  
For what they were not told, they will see,  
and what they have not heard, they will understand.

Norman suggest that Israel is the servant who *will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted*, and that -

... the Gentile kings 'shut their mouths' when they realise that they sinned by persecuting the Jews for their own benefit. <sup>[10]</sup>

However, *Yalkut 2* understands Messiah as the one who *will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted*:

He shall be higher than Abraham, to whom applies Genesis 14:22; higher than Moses, to whom Numbers 11:12 is predicated; higher than the ministering angels, of whom Ezekiel 1:18 is said.

But to him there applies this in Zechariah 4:7 - 'who art thou, O great mountain?' 'And he was wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities, that the punishment of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed.' Rabbi Huna says, in the name of Rabbi Acha: All sufferings are divided into three parts: one part goes to David and the Patriarchs, another to the generation of the rebellion, and a third to King Messiah ... [11] .

Thus, the astonishment of the Gentile kings would rather come from the fact that God could exact such a high price for human sin, and that he (Messiah) would *sprinkle many nations* with his blood.

### Response to point (3)

Norman correctly states that the nation Israel is often personified as its patriarch Jacob/Israel and thus spoken of in the masculine singular pronoun "he". It is also true that the nation Israel is often referred to in Scripture as the servant of God.

Israel's "servant obligation" or prophetic purpose originates in God's promise to Abraham, namely, that Abraham would become a great nation that would bring God's blessing to all the peoples of the earth. *Through your seed all nations on earth will be blessed* (Genesis 22:18).

Isaiah testifies to the fact that the nation Israel - Abraham's seed, collectively - had failed to achieve this purpose:

We were with child, we writhed in pain, but we gave birth to wind. We have not brought salvation to the earth; we have not given birth to people of the world. Isaiah 26:18

God could however fulfil his promises for Israel through a single Jew. This would have been the case if God had carried out his threat to destroy the entire nation in the wilderness and leave only Moses - and thereafter to form a new nation out of him (Exodus 32:10).

Messiah thus became the hope of Israel - for the fulfilment of all God's promises through him. Isaiah foresaw that Messiah would not only come to gather the lost sheep of Israel, but also to fulfil its prophetic destiny - bestowing the blessing that Israel would bring to the nations by taking the knowledge of God to the ends of the earth.

And now the LORD says -

he who formed me in the womb to be his servant

to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself,

for I am honoured in the eyes of the LORD

and my God has been my strength -

he says: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant

to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation (ἐὺνῆσθούε) to the ends of the earth." Isaiah 49:5-6

The servant Messiah (seed of Abraham, in the singular) is thus the fulfilment of God's prophetic purpose for the servant nation (the seed of Abraham, collectively). Thus Israel and Messiah form an inextricable unity in the writing of the prophets.

**What are the purpose and context of Isaiah's prophecies?**

While Norman at regular intervals accuses Christians of quoting verses out of context, he neglects to tell his readers anything of the background of this important prophecy.

The prophet Isaiah is sent to Israel at the time when its sins had reached its fullness. God's righteous punishment in terms of the Sinai Covenant would no longer be averted, but would culminate in the exile spoken of in Deuteronomy 28.

Isaiah denounces Israel as a nation with no understanding, a nation that does not know its God (Isaiah 1:3). The faithful city (Jerusalem) is compared with a prostitute, and the rulers of Israel are described as *rebels and companions of thieves ... who chase after gifts* (Isaiah 1:23). God proclaims Israel to be His enemy (Isaiah 1:24) on whom He will pour out His wrath (Isaiah 2:12-21).

At the same time God encourages the remnant, the penitent ones of Israel, by giving the prophet visions of Israel's golden age of restoration: *Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City. Zion will be redeemed with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness. But rebels and sinners will both be broken, and those who forsake the Lord will perish* (Isaiah 1:26-28).

The hope of the penitent ones is in Messiah, whose role in the redemption of Israel is pivotal to Isaiah's prophecies. Messiah is spoken of as *the Branch* (Isaiah 4:1), *the Shoot from the stump of Jesse*, springing *from his roots* (Isaiah 11:1), *the Root of Jesse* (Isaiah 11:10), *a tender Shoot* and a *Root out of dry ground* (Isaiah 53:2). In him (Messiah) the survivors in Israel, the remnant of Zion will be purified and called holy (Isaiah 4:3-4) and God's presence will eternally abide with them (Isaiah 4:5-6).

At the same time, the Gentiles will stream into the House of the God of Jacob and come to know His ways (Isaiah 2:3). This will happen as they *rally to* Messiah (Isaiah 11:10) who is a *light for the Gentiles* to bring God's *salvation to the ends of the earth* (Isaiah 49:6).

The manner of God's punishment against the Jews is revealed as a siege upon the city, in which the food and water supply will be cut off (Isaiah 3:1). God would remove the hedge of protection which He had promised over Israel in return for its obedience. The city's walls would be *broken down* and it would be *trampled* by its enemies. Judah would become *a wasteland* (Isaiah 4:5-6). The dead bodies would be as *refuse in the streets* (Isaiah 5:25). The rest would be taken into exile (Isaiah 6:12). Hostile nations are summoned by God (Isaiah 5:26) as His chosen instrument for the punishment of Israel (Isaiah 8:5-8).

The elders and leaders of Israel are identified as those chiefly responsible for its nefarious condition:

Hashem enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of the people: "it is you who have ruined my vineyard".  
Isaiah 3:14

Israel is warned not to follow its sages: *O my people, your guides lead you astray, they turn you from the path* (Isaiah 3:12). *Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Of what account is he?* (Isaiah 2:22). *Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight.* (Isaiah 5:21)

Consequently, the same God who is the *Saviour* (Isaiah 62:11) and becomes *Salvation* (Isaiah 12:2) for the remnant, would become a trap and a snare for many in Israel.

The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, and he will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare. Many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken, they will be snared and captured. Isaiah 8:13-15

The stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. Psalm 118:22

The only hope is repentance (Isaiah 59:20). Every Jew must turn to God and seek Him for himself (Isaiah 55:6-7).

**Did Christian translators distort the Hebrew text to force Jesus into the text?**

Finally, we must deal with Norman's accusation of Bible tampering. Norman contends -

the New King James Christian translation ... manipulated the text in Isaiah 53:3-5 by changing the tense from past to present ... in order to force Jesus into the text.

Most Bible scholars are aware of the fact that the Prophets often used a tense known as the prophetic past - thereby referring to future events in the past tense. This is to emphasise the certainty of what God has spoken, i.e. what God undertakes to do in the future is as good as done.

Norman himself is quite aware of this, as he too applies these past tense verses from Isaiah 53 to future events -

- Norman applies verse 3 to the Jews living "in walled ghettos in Europe" - more than 2000 years after the time of the prophecy;
- Norman suggests that verse 4 speaks of the attitude of the Gentiles arising from the fact that the Jews rejected Jesus - about 700 years after the time of the prophecy;
- Norman applies verse 7 to the crusades in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and to the time of the Nazi death camps - long after the time of the prophecy.

Norman also suggests the Christians distorted the text by changing the plural to the singular. Norman suggests that -

Isaiah's switch from *him* to *them* (*lamo* in Hebrew) is a fatal problem for the Christian claim that [verse 8 of Chapter 53] applies to one man, Jesus. Christian missionaries can plausibly claim that 'he' applies to Jesus but they cannot plausibly claim that 'them' applies to Jesus.

The most common translation of the Hebrew word *lamo* is either 'to them' or 'for them'. The Jerusalem Bible, an accepted Jewish translation, renders Isaiah 53:8 as follows:

By oppression and false judgment was he taken away; and of his generation who considered? For he was cut off from the land of the living, for the transgression of my people for whom the stroke was due.

Even though this translates *lamo* as plural, the verse is easily applied to Jesus, and the "problem" is thus void of its purported "fatality".

The following is an absolutely literal, word for word translation of Isaiah 53:8.

îðø	out of prison
âñùÑðè	and out of verdict / punishment / judicial sentence
ì÷ç	he has been taken away
ââúîãâðâ	and of his generation / contemporaries
îé	who?
éùÒâçç	will ponder / speak of
ëé	for / because
ðâæø	(he was) cut off / destroyed
îàøð	from the land
çééí	of the living
îðùÑò	out of / by reason of transgression
òíé	of my people
ðâò	infliction / plague
îîâÓ	for them

From this literal translation it is also clear that the Stone Edition of the Jewish Bible, with its overt anti-Christ agenda, takes obvious liberties with Hebrew syntax to derive its much contorted translation of this critical verse.

For he was removed from the land of the living, an affliction upon them that was my people's sin. Isaiah 53:8b, Jewish Bible, Stone Edition

Norman sites the translation of *lamo* into the singular "on him" as evidence of Bible tampering by Christians.

Both Christian and Jewish translations also render *lamo* as singular in certain other instances. It is clear from Isaiah 44:15, Psalm 11:7 and Job 27:23 that *lamo* in Hebrew sometimes denotes the singular case.

Both the Syraic and Ethiopic translations of the Jewish Scriptures render *lamo* in Isaiah 53:8 in the singular. (These predate the Christian era.)

For examples of Bible tampering, we should rather look to the translators of the Talmudic sect. A good example is the prophecy in Zechariah 12:10, quoted earlier -

They will look to Me, whom they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son.

The Jerusalem Bible renders this as -

They will look toward Me, because of those whom they have stabbed. They will mourn over him as one mourns over an only child... (changing *et asher* from the accusative case and inferring *those* as the object of the adjectival clause)

The Artscroll Bible translates this verse as -

'They shall look towards me, regarding those whom the nations have thrust through' (inserting the phrase "the nations" which does not appear in the original text).

Such a distortion can only be motivated by a desire to obfuscate the clear and literal meaning of a prophecy, contrary to the Talmudic reading of that verse in *Sukkat* 52a.

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\* Norman is the author of *Twenty-six reasons why Jews don't believe in Jesus*, Black White & Read Publishing Company, Los Angeles, California.

[1] op. cit., pp. 229 - 260.

[2] Midrash Konen, Beit haMidrash, Jellinek ed., 2:29-20.

[3] op. cit., p.229.

[4] *ibid.*

[5] op. cit., p.233.

[6] op. cit., p.230.

[7] *ibid.*

[8] op. cit., p.236.

[9] *ibid.*

[10] op. cit., p. 230.

[11] *Yalkut* 2, para 338, p.53c, lines 7 and following from the bottom.

This is my (Asher Norman's) response to the missionary response by Kevin Daly to my analysis of Isaiah 53 in my book, "Twenty-Six Reasons Why Jews Don't Believe In Jesus" available at [www.26reasons.com](http://www.26reasons.com).

The main missionary attack of my analysis of Isaiah 53 concerns messianic references in rabbinic commentaries in the Talmud, the Zohar and the Targum which I will deal with below in detail. I will begin

my response with the issue of circular reasoning. Even if we were to accept the missionary interpretation of Isaiah 53, the most that could be said is this: Isaiah's 53rd chapter is about someone who dies for the sins of others. People may have seen Jesus die, but it is not conceptually possible to see someone die as an atonement for the sins of others. It is merely a theological assertion by the writers of the New Testament intended to give meaning to Jesus' death. Only if one first accepts the New Testament teaching that Jesus' death had this non-visible, spiritual significance is it logically possible to assert that Isaiah confirmed Christian beliefs. Therefore, Isaiah 53 is in reality no "proof" at all but rather circular reasoning and a contrived confirmation for someone who has already chosen Christianity.

Second, virtually all of the "proofs" by the author of the missionary attack on my analysis are from rabbinic texts and commentaries (the Talmud, the Targum, the Zohar). However, the author has chosen not to reveal the fact that Christian theologians universally reject these texts because they contradict or reject the fundamental Christian faith claims about Jesus. It is the height of disingenuousness to use isolated out-of-context verses from Jewish texts to "prove" what the texts themselves reject! The author has intentionally misapplied these verses to falsify "proofs" and further his Christian missionary agenda.

Third, it is very important to note that while the author of the response to my analysis is grasping at Talmudic straws to support his forced interpretation of Isaiah 53, the Christian Bible contradicts him. It is obvious from the Gospel accounts that Jesus' hand picked disciples didn't view Isaiah 53 as a messianic prophecy. After the disciple Peter (a pillar of the Church and the first Pope) identified Jesus as "the Messiah" (Matthew 16:16), Peter is informed that Jesus will be killed. (Matthew 16:21) Peter's response is most telling: "God forbid it, lord! This shall never happen to you." (Matthew 16:22 and also Mark 9:31-32; Mark 16:10-11; John 20:9). Why didn't Peter joyfully exclaim: Praise God, you are the suffering servant of Isaiah 53!? Clearly, the disciples did not know that the Messiah was supposed to suffer and die nor did they view Jesus' impending death as "good news." Their reaction makes it abundantly clear that they had no concept that their messiah's suffering and death was prophesized by Isaiah 53. (Matthew 17:23, Luke 18:34, John 20:9)

Further, Jesus' enemies such as King Herod certainly didn't think that the Messiah was supposed to be killed. Otherwise why would Herod help Jesus' cause by trying to kill him? (Matthew 2)

Fourth, Jesus himself obviously didn't see Isaiah 53 as relevant to his messianic claims. Otherwise he would not have called the Jews "children of the devil" for not believing in him before his suffering, death and alleged resurrection. (John. 8:39-47) Nor would Jesus have requested God to "remove this cup from me." (Mark 14:36) By asking God to "remove the cup" Jesus clearly wanted God to allow him to live and not be killed. Didn't Jesus know that if God listened to Jesus and "removed the cup" he would not be able to fulfill (the current missionary interpretation of) Isaiah's prophecy? It is more likely that Jesus didn't know about this interpretation of Isaiah 53 because until he suffered and died there was no need for Christian missionaries to re-interpret Isaiah 53 to explain his death. Parenthetically, since Jesus is supposedly a member of the trinity, was Jesus speaking to himself when he asked God to "remove the cup?"

Fifth, there are two verses in Isaiah 53:10 that could not possibly refer to Jesus. (Properly translated) Isaiah 53:10 says, "**He** [the suffering servant] **would see offspring.**" The Hebrew word for "offspring" (**zera**) literally means **sperm**. As one would expect, "zera" is **always** used in the Jewish Bible to denote **physical** descendants, **never** "spiritual" descendants such as disciples or followers. There are no exceptions to this rule in the Jewish Bible. There is no indication in the Christian Bible that Jesus left physical descendants, (offspring) and therefore, Isaiah 53 cannot possibly be about him. In the Jewish Bible when spiritual descendants are intended, the Hebrew word "ben," which means "son" is always used.

In addition, Isaiah said the servant "...[would] **live long days...**" (Isaiah 53:10) According to the Christian NKJ and the NIV translations [God] will "**prolong his days.**" (Ibid) "Prolonged days" means a long life, which cannot possibly apply to Jesus. Jesus allegedly died at about 30 years of age, which is not a "prolonged" life. Also, if Jesus was "god" as Christians claim, he was in essence an eternal (not mortal) being whose life could not have been "prolonged." Although this description cannot fit Jesus, it does fit the Jewish People perfectly, whose physical survival (notwithstanding millenniums of persecution) is legendary in the face of overwhelming odds. Significantly, the Jewish People are the **only** biblical people that have survived to the modern era as a distinct people. Therefore, the days of the **physical descendants** of the Jewish People have truly and miraculously been "**prolonged**" for 3200 years and have fulfilled this prophecy and every other prophecy in Isaiah 53.

It is important to note that here is no scriptural basis in Isaiah 53, the Torah or the Jewish Bible to support the Christian faith claim that it is necessary to "believe in the Messiah" for personal salvation. God gave the Jewish People a detailed instruction manual (the Torah) containing 613

commandments so that we would have the tools to make moral choices. According to Jewish theology, each person determines their own personal salvation based upon their own moral choices. Therefore, even if Jesus were the messiah there would be no need to "believe" in him for personal salvation.

The Jewish people expected the messiah (ben David) to rule as king over a restored Israel, to rebuild the Temple and ingather the Jews back to Israel in an age of universal peace and knowledge of God. (Acts 1:6, 2 Samuel 7:12-16, Isaiah 11:9,12, Jeremiah 23:5-6, 31:33, Isaiah 2:4, Micah 4:3, Ezekiel 37: 21-28. See Reason 8 in "Twenty-Six Reasons Jews Don't Believe In Jesus.") However, there are ancient sources that explicitly refer to a supernatural savior, born from a virgin mother on December 25<sup>th</sup>, whose birth was associated with a star, who offered his followers the chance to be born again through baptism, who miraculously turned water into wine at a marriage ceremony, who had 12 disciples, rode into town on a donkey, was crucified as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, whose body was wrapped in linen and anointed with myrrh, who rose from the dead on the third day, whose followers await his return during the Last Days, and whose resurrection is celebrated by a ritual meal of bread and wine. You can read all about him in the mythology books of the pagan man/god Osiris-Dionysus. (See Reason 24 in "Twenty-Six Reasons Why Jews Don't Believe In Jesus.")

**Now lets take a look at the rabbinic texts that were used to attack my analysis of Isaiah 53.** God designed the Torah with layers of meaning. The first, most basic layer of meaning is called "psat." It refers to the plain, basic understanding of the text. In addition to the psat, rabbinic commentators often reveal additional layers of poetic, non-literal meanings in their textual interpretation, which refer to more esoteric matters known as midrash. Midrash is usually expressed in stories and references to people and Jewish figures that explain and embellish important Jewish theological ideas. It is very common for Jewish commentators to interpret a text in the Jewish Bible by explaining both its psat and also overlay the psat with additional midrashic interpretation. It is fundamental that in such a case the midrash is **never** intended by the commentator to contradict the psat. In the case of Isaiah 53, the psat of the identity of the "servant" is repeatedly and explicitly defined by Isaiah as Jacob/Israel (the Jewish People) in verses 41:8-9, 44:1, 44:21, 45:4, 48:20, and 49:3. The second century church father Origen reported in his book Contra Celsum that this was the Jewish understanding. By ignoring these verses and failing to disclose that a second century Church father confirmed this was always the Jewish understanding of Isaiah's "servent" the author of the response to my analysis revealed his theological agenda rather than a search for truth.

Missing from the response to my analysis of Isaiah 53 is the basic fact that all the rabbinic commentators agree that the psat concerning the identity of the "servant" in Isaiah 53 is Jacob/Israel (the Jewish People). However, we shall see below that some of these rabbinic commentators to Isaiah 53 also include (in addition to the psat) an additional midrashic overlay wherein they allude to additional theological figures or individuals such as Moses, messiah ben Joseph, the angel Metatron, Israel, the righteous of Israel, the soul and the nations. It is noteworthy and telling that the author of the response to my analysis of Isaiah 53 mentioned secondary midrashic **messianic** allusions but failed to mention that these commentators also made allusions to many other figures. Once again, this omission makes his agenda obvious.

I reiterate for emphasis that these secondary midrashic references to figures other than Jacob/Israel by the commentators were not intended to contradict the psat (plain meaning) of Isaiah 53. They simply represent a poetic, esoteric, **secondary** overlay by the commentators. With this in mind, let's look at how the missionary author of the response to my analysis ignored the psat to force Jesus into these rabbinic texts.

The Zohar does not support the Christian interpretation of Isaiah 53. The author of the response to my analysis and other Christian missionary literature pretends that Kabbalistic works support their interpretation of Isaiah 53. Missionaries attempt this theological slight of hand because there are few people who have any idea what appears in Kabbalistic texts, or what these texts mean. The Zohar has become a special favorite of the missionaries because its obtuse and allegorical language makes it easy to take a sentence or two out of context, and make it appear to say whatever the missionary wants it to say while contradicting what the Zohar explicitly says in other places. The brilliant Talmudic scholar Moshe Schulman explains and discusses more about the holy Zohar:

"According to Jewish tradition the author of the Zohar was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who lived in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE. The Zohar is made up of various books. We can talk about them as if they were only three (*although there is more than that*). The First is the Holy Zohar itself. That is a three-volume Kabbalistic Midrashic commentary on the Torah (*first 5 books of the Tanach*). It has a few sub-divisions in it, some more esoteric than others. Some appear no different than a standard Midrash, but most of it is esoteric in nature. The second book is called Tekunei HaZohar (*the Rectifications of the Zohar*). This is very esoteric and involves Kabbalistic discussions and understandings of many of the Biblical commandments. It is based on discussions of the first word in the Torah. It has 70 chapters, or Tikkunim,

of varied length, followed by a few additions in the back. The third section is called the Zohar Chadash. It is like the Zohar, but smaller. It also has Midrashic material on 3 of the 5 Magillas (Ruth, Song of Songs, Lamentations) and it's own Tikkunim.

Within this collection of around 1000 pages there are a few passages where verses from Isaiah 53 are mentioned in these Kabbalistic works. In these few Midrashic commentaries on Isaiah 53 the object varies. I will bring all of these references, although for obvious reasons, only references to the messiah are mentioned by the missionaries.

In discussion of Kabbalistic concepts we have 5 references in Isaiah:

1. 52:13 in Zohar Volume III 246b.
2. 53:1 in Tekunei HaZohar page 28a; Zohar Volume I 253a.
3. 53:5 in Zohar Chadash page 91a
4. 53:7 in Zohar Volume I 137b.

Verse 53:10 is applied to the **soul** in the Zohar Volume I page 168a.

There are numerous individuals that the Zohar applies Isaiah 53 to:

1. 52:13-14 is applied to the Angel **Metatron** in Zohar Volume I 182a.
2. 53:5 is applied to **Elijah the prophet** in Zohar Volume II 115b.
3. 53:5 is applied to **Moshiach ben Yosef** in Zohar Volume III 276b.

Then we have the following seven references to **Moses**:

1. 52:13 in Zohar Volume III page 153b.
2. 52:13, 53:2,5 in Zohar Volume III 280a.
3. 53:1 in Tekunei HaZohar page 43a.
4. 53:5 in Tekunei HaZohar page 54b and 112a.
5. 53:5,7 in Zohar Volume III 125b.
6. 53:5,6,7 in Zohar Volume III 282b.
7. 53:7 in Zohar Volume I 187a.
8. 53:10 in Zohar Volume II 29b.

There are 8 references to the **Righteous of Israel**:

1. 52:12 in Zohar Chadash page 15a
2. 52:13 in Zohar Volume I 181a.

3. 53:5 in Zohar Volume III 218a, 231a, 247b

4. 53:10 in Zohar Volume I 140a; Volume II 244b; Volume III 57b

To summarize: Five of the occurrences deal with Kabbalistic subjects and do not refer to people at all. The most common subject of Isaiah 53 in the Zohar is the righteous of Israel (8) and two more referring to Israel following the view of the Jewish commentators. The next in order of occurrences is Moses (7). The four of the other five occurrences are one each for the Messiah the son of Joseph (a descendant of Jeroboam the son of Nevat), the angel Metatron, Elijah the prophet and the soul. This demonstrates that to make a claim that 'the Zohar teaches that Isaiah 53 refers to the messiah is a gross distortion and falsification of the text.'

The Targum does not support the Christian interpretation of Isaiah 53 The following analysis of the Targum is also by Moshe Schulman:

"Most missionary books and articles that utilize Rabbinic sources to support their arguments, mention the Targum of Yonason Ben Uzziel as a 'proof' that the ancient Rabbis believed that the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 was the Moshiach Ben Dovid, the King Messiah. Most missionary sources quote just a single verse from it.

The Targum is a midrashic commentary, not a literal one. The Targum is not strictly telling us what the verses say, but what Judaism teaches. It is painting for us a picture of the end-times and Jewish eschatology.

This is something that the more knowledgeable missionaries know, even if they are reluctant to admit it in a clear way in their books. Now that we recognize that this is a Midrashic comment, we need to try and understand what the Targum is trying to teach us. In it we see a picture painted for us. It is of the end-times.

The Christian missionary scholar Dr. Louis Goldberg in his pamphlet 'A Jewish Christian response' summarizes what appears in the Targum. He states that 'all the verses which relate to exaltation were applied to a (sic) personal Messiah, while the remainder of the passage relating to suffering was applied to the nation'.

So the **Targum** is teaching us two points: The Messiah will be an exalted character, and the Jewish people suffered in exile. Sounds pretty much like what we find in traditional Jewish commentaries.

When the Targum is compared to a translation of the original passage in Isaiah 53 it is easy to notice that the Targum is not a translation at all, nor is

it a simple explanation of the verses. It is a **Midrash**, in the style we have just explored. The translation from the JPS is bold letters. The translation of the Targum is by Driver and Neubauer as that is the one that is usually quoted from by the missionaries. The Targum is not a translation, nor can it be called 'commentary' in the usual sense of the word. If we look in the commentaries of the Rambam (Maimonides) where he discusses the Messiah, his time, and his role we see most if not all of what appears in this Targum about the Messiah.

There is nothing especially surprising here for anyone familiar with the beliefs of historical Judaism. What is interesting is that so much of the Jewish beliefs are explicitly mentioned in the Targum to Isaiah 53.

When we examine the text of the Targum we observe that the Targum's words agree with the Rambam about the messianic period. This is in stark contrast to Christian theology about the Messiah, which is conspicuously absent from the **Targum**. Lets take a closer look at the texts themselves. In each case below the first verse (in bold) is the translation of Isaiah and the second verse (not in bold) is the Targum.

**52:13 Behold, My servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high.**

*52:13. Behold my servant Messiah shall prosper; he shall be high, and increase, and be exceeding strong:*

Here the servant is the Messiah. The Targum is almost the exact same wording as the Hebrew, except that he mentions the Messiah. We see that the Messiah will be of an exalted character, something that the Rambam emphasizes in his commentary to the Mishnah. *"The Messiah will be a very great king, whose government will be in Zion. He will achieve great fame, and his reputation among the nations will be even greater than that of King Solomon."*

**52:14 According as many were appalled at thee—so marred was his visage unlike that of a man, and his form unlike that of the sons of men—**

*52:14. as the house of Israel looked to him during many days, because their countenance was darkened among the peoples, and their complexion (darkened) beyond the sons of men,*

Here the servant is Israel. We see how Israel suffered abuse in their exile while waiting for the Messiah to come.

**52:15 So shall he startle many nations, kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them shall they see, and that which they had not heard shall they perceive.**

*52:15. so will he scatter many peoples; at him kings shall be silent, and put their hands upon their mouth, because that which was not told them have they seen, and that which they had not heard they have observed.*

The servant is the Messiah again. We see how the Messiah will be victorious in war against all enemies. This reflects what the Rambam wrote in his commentary to the Mishnah: *“Whoever rises up against him will be destroyed by G-d and given over into his hand.”*

**53:1 ‘Who would have believed our report? And to whom hath the arm of the LORD been revealed?’**

*53:1. Who hath believed this our glad tidings? and the strength of the mighty arm of HaShem, upon whom hath it been revealed?*

This seems to be similar to what the Rambam stated: *“His great righteousness and the wonders that he will bring about will cause all peoples to make peace with him and all the lands will serve him.”*

**53:2 For he shot up right forth as a sapling, and as a root out of a dry ground; he had no form nor comeliness, that we should look upon him, nor beauty that we should delight in him.**

*53:2. The righteous will grow up before him, yeah, like blooming shoots, and like a tree which sends forth its roots to streams of water; will they increase - a holy generations (lit. holy children) in the land that was in need of him; his countenance no profane countenance, and the terror at him not the terror of a simple person; his complexion shall be a holy complexion, and all who see him will look (stare) upon him.*

The servant in this verse is the righteous of Israel. It appears that this verse is the source for Rashi saying that the servant is the righteous of Israel, and not just all of Israel. We see that not just the Messiah, as mentioned in 52:13, but all the righteous of Israel will be exalted in that time.

**53:3 He was despised, and forsaken of men, a man of pains, and acquainted with disease, and as one from whom men hide their face: he was despised, and we esteemed him not.**

*53:3. Then he will despise, and will cut off the glory of all the kingdoms; they will be weakened and mourning, like a man of pains and like one prepared for sicknesses; and as though the presence of the Shekhinah had been withdrawn, they will be despised, and esteemed not.*

It seems that the servant here is the nations, an interesting twist in his interpretation. This seems to be a continuation of 52:15 where we see that the nations who have caused the suffering to Israel will be subjugated.

**53:4 Surely our diseases he did bear, and our pains he carried; whereas we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.**

*53:4. Then for our sins he will pray, and our iniquities will for his sake be silenced, and we were accounted stricken, smitten from before HaShem, and afflicted.*

The servant's role here is applied to both the Messiah and Israel. In Mishnah Torah Kings 11:4 the Rambam says: "lead all Jews back to the Torah, strengthen the observance of its laws" This is what the Messiah is doing here. The Targum also discusses the suffering in exile of Israel, and what the nations said about them.

**53:5 But he was wounded because of our transgressions, he was crushed because of our iniquities: the chastisement of our welfare was upon him, and with his stripes we were healed.**

*53:5. But he will build up the Holy Place, which has been polluted for our sins, and delivered (to the enemy) for our iniquities; and by his instruction peace shall be increased upon us, and by devotion to his words, our sins will be forsaken.*

The servant here is the Messiah. We see described the 'job' of the Messiah. It is almost exactly what the Rambam has stated: Book of Kings 11:4. We may assume that a person is the Messiah if he fulfills the following conditions: He must be a ruler, from the house of David, immersed in Torah and its commandments like David his ancestor. He must also follow both the written and the Oral Torah, lead all Jews back to the Torah, strengthen the observance of its laws, and fight G-d's battles. If one fulfills these conditions then we may assume he is the Messiah. If he

does this successfully, and then rebuilds the Temple on its original site and gathers all the dispersed Jews, then we may be certain that he is the Messiah. He will then perfect the entire world and bring all men to serve G-d in unity.”

**53:6 All we like sheep did go astray, we turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath made to light on him the iniquity of us all.**

*53:6. All we like sheep had been scattered, we were exiled, each wandered off on his own way; but it was HaShem's will to forsake the sins of all of us for his sake.*

Here we see Israel's position in exile and Israel's sins being forgiven. (In the next few verses we see what the Messiah does to cause this: prayer and teaching Torah to the people.)

**53:7 He was oppressed, though he humbled himself and opened not his mouth; as a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before her shearers is dumb; yea, he opened not his mouth.**

*53:7. He prayed, and he was answered, and ere even he had opened his mouth he was accepted; the mighty of the peoples he will deliver up like a sheep to the slaughter and like a lamb dumb before her shearers; there shall be none before him opening his mouth or saying a word*

The servant here is again the nations. As to the role of the Messiah in this verse the Rambam says: *“Whoever rises up against him will be destroyed by G-d and given over into his hand.”*

**53:8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away, and with his generation who did reason? for he was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due.**

*53:8. Out of suffering and punishment he will bring our exiles; the wondrous things done to us in his days who shall be able to tell? For he will cause the dominion of the Gentiles to pass away from the land of Israel and transfer to them the sins which my people have committed.*

The servant here is Israel. The suffering of Israel in the exile will be ended. As to the Messiah what it says here follows what the Rambam says in the book of Kings 11:1. "The Messiah will be a king who will restore the kingdom of David to its original state. He will rebuild the Temple and gather together all Jews, no matter where they were scattered." Also in his commentary on the Mishnah: "The main benefit of the Messianic Age will be that we will no longer be under the subjugation of foreign governments who prevent us from keeping all the commandments."

Parenthetically: With regard to the use of the word, "lamo" in Hebrew in Isaiah 53:8: "From my peoples' sins, there was injury to them." Here the Prophet makes absolutely clear, to anyone familiar with Biblical Hebrew, that the oppressed Servant is a collective Servant, not a single individual. The Hebrew word "lamo - (lamed-mem-vav)," when used in our Scriptures, always means "to them" never "to him" and may be found, for example, in Psalm 99:7 - "They kept his testimonies, and the statute that He gave to them."

**53:9 And they made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich his tomb; although he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.'**

*53:9. He will deliver the wicked into Gehinnom, and those that are rich in possessions, that were forced from us, into the death of utter destruction, in order that those who commit sin may not prevail, nor speak deceits with their mouth.*

The servant here is the nations. This is a continuation of the previous verse of the victory over the gentiles.

**53:10 Yet it pleased the LORD to crush him by disease; to see if his soul would offer itself in restitution, that he might see his seed, prolong his days, and that the purpose of the LORD might prosper by his hand:**

*53:10. But it is HaShem's will to purify and to cause suffering to the remnant of his people, so as to cleanse their souls from sin; these shall look on the Kingdom of their Messiah, their sons and their daughters shall be multiplied, they shall prolong their days, and those who perform the Law of HaShem shall prosper by His Will.*

The servant here is Israel. We see that the suffering in exile was for the good of Israel and they shall merit to have many children, and those who keep the Torah (the righteous) will prosper.

**53:11 Of the travail of his soul he shall see to the full, even My servant, who by his knowledge did justify the Righteous One to the many, and their iniquities he did bear.**

*53:11. From the subjection of the nations he will deliver their souls, they shall look upon the punishment of those that hate them, and be satisfied with the spoil of their kings; by his wisdom he will hold cause merit to the meritorious, in order to bring many into service to the law; and for their sins he will intercede.*

The servant here is both Israel and the Messiah. He repeats here the successful end to the enemies of Israel, and that Israel will divide the spoils from these enemies.

**53:12 Therefore will I divide him a portion among the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the mighty; because he bared his soul unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.**

*53:12. Then will I divide for him the spoil of many peoples, and the possessions of strong cities shall he divide as spoils, because he was willing to suffer martyrdom, and made the rebellious subject to the Law: he shall intercede for the sins of many, and the sins of the rebellious for his sake shall be forsaken*

The servant here is the Messiah. A repetition of what was said above in 53:5 and 53:11.

In the Targum numerous references are made to a 'national interpretation' of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. Verses like 52:14, 53:4,8 and 10 all discuss the suffering of Israel in exile where the verse in the original discusses the suffering of the 'servant'. There are even places where the suffering of the servant is applied to the punishments that will befall the nations in the end of days.

But there is a problem. This is a Midrashic commentary. It is theology and not exegesis. We see that the theology of the Targum and that of historical Judaism are in agreement. The question is can we discern who the Targum believes is the subject of Isaiah 53? I think that we can. I think that we have a few pieces of information that tells us that in the time of the Targum they understood the simple meaning of Isaiah 53 is that the suffering servant is referring to Israel, or the Righteous of Israel.

The first fact is based on a simple question: Why is Moshiach ben Yosef not mentioned in this passage of the Targum? In a few others places the Targum mentions Moshiach ben Yosef. Had the Targum wanted to indicate that Isaiah 53 related to the idea of a suffering Messiah figure, then it would have been natural for him to include mention of Moshiach ben Yosef. By excluding mention of Moshiach ben Yosef in Isaiah 53 the Targum shows that he excludes the idea of a single person for the subject of the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, especially the Messiah.

Secondly, all sources, Christian and Jewish; acknowledge that the subject of Isaiah 53 is a servant who suffers. As we saw from Dr. Goldberg, and from our examination of the Targum itself, the person suffering is **ISRAEL**. The inclusion of discussion about what the Messiah would be like and what he would do does not change anything with regards to that fact. This is, after all, a Midrash that is trying to teach something theological about the end-times period. It tells us many things, all of which Judaism accepts and acknowledges to the present day. And one point it makes quite clearly is that Israel has suffered in the exile.

These two points give us strong proof and confidence that, just like the theology the Targum teaches with regards to Isaiah 53 is what Historical Judaism believes, so the identification of the servant as Israel or the righteous of Israel, which Historical Judaism believes, is the same as the Targum. The Targum does not teach that the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is the Messiah. There is nothing in the **Targum** that even remotely is connected with the Christian theology about a Messiah who dies for the sins of the world. No person reading the **Targum** objectively, from beginning to end, would make such a contention."

Those Christian missionaries who desperately ransacked the Mishna, the Talmud, the Targum and the Zohar to find support for their preconceived ideas are not interested in the actual teachings of Rabbinic Judaism. They merely use these texts like a drunk uses a lamp post - for support, not illumination.

Sincerely,

Asher Norman

I wish to thank Moshe Schulman @ [www.messiahtruth.com](http://www.messiahtruth.com) and Larry Levey, former Hebrew-Christian @ [www.jewsforjudaism.org](http://www.jewsforjudaism.org) for their website material on Isaiah 53.