

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

by  
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CHAPTER II

*THE ANCIENT JEWISH INTERPRETATION OF  
ISAIAH LIII.*

There is truth in the observation of a scholarly writer that this great prophecy was "an enigma which could not be fully understood in the days before Christ, but which has been solved by the sufferings, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Him who was both Son of Man and Son of God."<sup>1</sup>

It is therefore not surprising to find that in the Talmud and Rabbinic Midrashim there is much confusion and contradiction in the various interpretations advanced by the Rabbis. But though it may be true, as Professor Dalman observes,<sup>2</sup> that the Messianic interpretation was not the general one, or the one officially recognized in Israel (any more than any of the other interpretations can be said to have been either generally or officially recognized), yet from most ancient times there have not been wanting authoritative teachers who interpreted the chapter of the Messiah--in spite of the fact that the picture of the Redeemer which is here drawn is utterly opposed to the disposition and to the perverted hopes and expectations in reference to the Messiah which have developed in Rabbinic Judaism.

In proof of this, the following few brief extracts from ancient Jewish interpretations will interest the Christian reader:

First, let me quote Jonathan ben Uzziel (first century A.D.), who begins his Targum with, "Behold, my Servant Messiah shall prosper; He shall be high and increase, and be exceeding strong." And then, to reconcile the interpretation of this scripture of the Messiah with his reluctance to recognize that the promised Deliverer must suffer and die for the sins of the nation, he proceeds to juggle with the scripture in a most extraordinary manner, making all the references to exaltation and glory in the chapter to apply to the Messiah, but the references to tribulation and sufferings to Israel. In

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. C. H. H. Wright, *The Servant of Jehovah*.

<sup>2</sup> Jesaja liii., *Das Prophetenwort, vom Suhnleiden des Heilmittlers*.

illustration of the method by which this is accomplished I need quote only his paraphrase of the very next verse (lii. 14), which reads: "As the House of Israel looked to Him during many days, because their countenance was darkened among the people, and their complexion beyond the sons of men."

In the Talmud Babylon,<sup>3</sup> among other opinions, we find the following: "The Messiah--what is His name? . . . The Rabbis say the 'leprous one';<sup>4</sup> (those) of the house of Rabbi (say), 'the sick one,' as it is said, 'Surely He hath borne our sicknesses.'"<sup>5</sup>

That the generally received older Jewish interpretation of this prophecy was the Messianic is admitted by Abrabanel, who himself proceeds in a long polemic against the Nazarenes to interpret it of the Jewish nation. He begins: "The first question is to ascertain to whom (this scripture) refers: for the learned among the Nazarenes expound it of the man who was crucified in Jerusalem at the end of the second Temple, and who according to them was the Son of God and took flesh in the virgin's womb, as is stated in their writings. Jonathan ben Uzziel interprets it in the Targum of the future Messiah; and *this is also the opinion of our learned men in the majority of their Midrashim.*"

Similarly another (Rabbi Mosheh el Sheikh, commonly known as Alshech, second half of the sixteenth century), who also himself follows the older interpretation, at any rate of the first three verses (lii. 13-15, which, however, as we shall see when we come to the interpretation, contain a summary of the whole prophecy), testifies that *our Rabbis with one voice accept and affirm the opinion that the prophet is speaking of the King Messiah.*<sup>6</sup>

In fact, until Rashi<sup>7</sup> (Rabbi Solomon Yizchaki) applied it to the Jewish nation, the Messianic interpretation of this chapter was almost universally adopted by Jews, and his view, which we shall examine presently, although received by Aben Ezra, Kimchi, and others, was rejected as unsatisfactory by Maimonides, who is regarded by the Jews as of highest authority, by Alshech (as stated above),

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3 *Sanhedrim*, fol. 98b.

4 This is based on a wrong interpretation of the word נָגוּעַ, *nagua*--"stricken" or "plagued," as meaning "leprous."

5 The other names of the Messiah mentioned in this passage are: "Shiloh," with reference to Gen. xlix. 10, "until Shiloh comes"; "Yinnon," with reference to Ps. lxxii. 17, "His name shall endure for ever; before the sun (was created) his name was Yinnon"; "Haninah," in reference to Jer. xvi. 13, "where no Haninah (favour) will be given to you"; "M'nahem," son of Hezekiah, in reference to Lam. i. 16, "the Comforter (M'nahem) that should restore my soul is far from me."

6 הנה ר'ז'ל פה אחד קיימו וקבלו כי על מלך המשיח ידבר

7 Rashi, 1040-1105.

and many others, one of whom<sup>8</sup> says the interpretation adopted by Rashi "distorts the passage from its natural meaning," and that in truth "it was given of God as a description of the Messiah, whereby, when any should claim to be the Messiah, to judge by the resemblance or non-resemblance to it whether he were the Messiah or no." And another<sup>9</sup> says: "The meaning of 'He was wounded for our transgressions, . . . bruised for our iniquities,' is that since the Messiah bears our iniquities, which produce the effect of His being bruised, it follows that whoso will not admit that the Messiah thus suffers for our iniquities must endure and suffer for them himself."

Before proceeding to an examination of the modern Jewish interpretation of this chapter, let me add two further striking testimonies to its more ancient Messianic interpretation--taken this time, not from any Targum, or Midrash, or Rabbinical Commentary, which might be said to express the individual opinion of this or that Rabbi, but from the Jewish liturgy, which may be said to bear upon it the seal of the authority and usage of the whole Synagogue.

The first is taken from the Liturgy for the Day of Atonement--the most solemn day in the Jewish year--and reads as follows: "We are shrunk up in our misery even until now! Our Rock hath not come nigh to us; Messiah our righteousness (or 'our Righteous Messiah') has departed from us: Horror hath seized upon us, and we have none to justify us. He hath borne the yoke of our iniquities and our transgressions, and is wounded because of our transgression. He beareth our sins on His shoulder, that He may find pardon for our iniquities. We shall be healed by His wound at the time the Eternal will create Him (Messiah) as a new creature. O bring Him up from the circle of the earth, raise Him up from Seir to assemble us the second time on Mount Lebanon, by the hand of Yinnon."<sup>10</sup>

The other passage is also from the *Machsor* (Liturgy for the Festival Services) and will be found among the prayers on the Feast of Passover. It is as follows: "Flee, my beloved, until the end of the vision shall speak; hasten, and the shadows shall take their flight hence: high and exalted and lofty shall be the despised one; he shall

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<sup>8</sup> R. Mosheh Kohen Iben Crispin, of Cordova, and afterwards of Toledo (fourteenth century). He rightly says of those who for controversial reasons applied this prophecy to Israel that by so doing "the doors of the literal interpretation of this Parashah were shut in their face, and that they wearied themselves to find the entrance, having forsaken the knowledge of our teachers, and inclined after the stubbornness of their own hearts and of their own opinions."

<sup>9</sup> R. Eliyya de Vidas, 1575 A.D.

<sup>10</sup> This prayer or hymn forms part of the Musaph Service for the Day of Atonement. The author, according to Zunz (*Literatur geschichte der Syn. Poesie*, p. 56, etc.), was Eleazer ben Kalir, who lived in the ninth century. Yinnon, as will be seen from the quotation from Talmud Sanhedrin on p. 12, was one of the names given by the Rabbis to the Messiah, and is derived from Psalm lxxii. 17, which the Talmud renders, "Before the sun was, His name"--a rendering and explanation which implies a belief in the pre-existence of the Messiah.

be prudent in judgment, and shall sprinkle many! Lay bare thine arm!  
cry out, and say: 'The voice of my beloved; behold he cometh!'"<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>David Levi, the English translator of the *Machsor*, a Jew, says in a note that this verse referred to "the true Messiah."