

# Debunking the Isaiah 53 “Forbidden Chapter” Conspiracy



Some Christian missionaries claim, especially in online videos, that there is a conspiracy to hide the truth from you.

They assert, “There is a chapter in the Tanach [Jewish scriptures] that used to be read in synagogues, but later, the rabbis decided to take it out of the Haftarah [weekly prophetic readings] ‘to avoid confusion’... and today it is considered ‘The Forbidden Chapter,’ hidden from Jews.”

The chapter that missionaries say the rabbis do not want you to read is Isaiah 53. Most Christians believe this chapter describes the messiah [Jesus] dying for our sins.

This easily debunked claim<sup>1</sup> is a ploy to get people to read “The Forbidden Chapter” out of context and consequently accept Jesus. However, when read in context, Isaiah 53 is not speaking about anyone dying “for” our sins. Isaiah describes the Jewish people who suffered “from” the violence perpetrated against them by the nations of the world.

Furthermore, concerning a conspiracy, the missionaries are either intentionally misleading people or are ignorant of the history of the public reading of the prophets.

There are numerous problems with their conspiracy theory:

- 1) No rabbinic edicts exist that prohibit Jews from reading any portion of the Jewish Bible. On the contrary, the Jewish Bible, including the Book of Isaiah, is accessible to anyone who wants to read it.
- 2) The weekly prophetic readings, as we know them, were instituted in the second century BCE when the Greek King Antiochus forbade Jews from reading from the Torah [Five Books of Moses]. Since Antiochus did not forbid reading from the Prophets, the sages instituted the weekly public reading of a portion of the Prophets that shared a theme corresponding to the outlawed Torah reading. In this way, the weekly Torah portion would not be forgotten.
- 3) The sages used only a small portion of the Books of the Prophets to accomplish their immediate goal. The omission of the remainder of the prophetic writings was not intended to hide their content; to the contrary, they were available to anyone who wanted to read them.
- 4) If the rabbis had conspired to hide prophetic passages that Christians claim to refer to Jesus, they would not have included Isaiah 9:6 as part of the reading for Yitro, as is the custom of many Jewish congregations. Although Christians misinterpret this passage to prove that Jesus is divine, our sages knew that when read in context, Jews would understand that Isaiah 9:6 refers to the righteous King Hezekiah. Similarly, the sages did not “hide” other Torah passages that Christians claim refer to Jesus.

As mentioned above, specific portions of the Books of the Prophets were chosen to correspond to the yearly Torah reading cycle. These portions were divided into different categories: the Torah portion, holidays, the three weeks leading to the commemoration of the destruction of the

Temple on the Ninth of Av, and the subsequent seven weeks of consolation and comfort. Although during these weeks of comfort select portions of consolation are read from Isaiah, the message in Isaiah 53, and most of the Book of Isaiah, were not included because they do not specifically address consolation.

- 5) Lastly, some scholars point out that the Dead Sea Scrolls contain a parchment known as 4Q176. This parchment is also referred to as 4QTanhumi [Tanhumi means comfort] and lists similar chapters from Isaiah read as consolation and comfort for the destruction of the Temple. Interestingly, this parchment does not include Isaiah 53. Since the Dead Sea Scrolls are associated with non-rabbinic sects, this refutes the claim that there was a “rabbinical conspiracy” to hide Isaiah 53 from the public.

**If there is a conspiracy, it is by missionaries.** They hide the plain and obvious meaning of Isaiah 53 by reading it out of context and mistranslating crucial words to fit Jesus into the chapter.

As mentioned above, to understand the true meaning of Isaiah 53 it must be read in context.

Although Isaiah 53 speaks about a “suffering servant of God,” anyone who reads Isaiah from the beginning knows that “Israel” is repeatedly referred to as God’s servant. Two examples: “*Israel is my Servant*” (Isaiah 41:8), and “*For you, Israel, are My servant*” (Isaiah 44:21).

It is common in Tanach [Jewish Scriptures] to refer to the nation of Israel as a single individual. For example, it says, “*And the people gathered as one man*” (Nehemiah 8:1). In a revealing passage, “*You are My witnesses, says the Lord, and My servant whom I have chosen*” (Isaiah 43:10), the subject Israel is referred to first in the plural and then in the singular.

### **So, about whom and what is Isaiah 53 speaking?**

Starting in Isaiah 52, the prophet describes the reaction of the nations of the world when they witness<sup>2</sup> the future and ultimate messianic redemption of the Jewish people.

Since the nations viewed the Jewish people scornfully and considered them rejected by God and deserving of Divine suffering, they will be shocked and dumbfounded<sup>3</sup> when they witness God’s unexpected and glorious redemption of the Jewish people.

At this point, the nations and their leaders will be left wondering and conclude that the Jewish people did not suffer because God rejected them, as the nations mistakenly thought; instead, it was because they persecuted the Jewish people beyond what they may have deserved.<sup>4</sup>

This is the meaning of the passage, “he [Israel] was wounded from our [the nations] transgression and bruised from our [the nations’] iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5). Israel suffered from the mistreatment of the nations.

In English translations of this chapter, Christians mistranslate the prefix [ל] as “for” rather than “from.” This manipulates the text to sound as if the servant will suffer **for the sins** of the Jewish people. Fortunately, some Christian translations, such as the New Oxford Annotated Bible, have acknowledged and corrected this mistake.

The idea that the Jewish people suffered from or because of the nations’ misdeeds is substantiated in the passage, “*For the transgress of my [the nation’s] people they [למור—lamow, i.e., the Jewish people] were stricken*” (Isaiah 53:8). The word [למור] is biblical Hebrew and is a plural word as in, “*a statute that He gave [למור] to them*” (Psalms 99:7). Missionaries incorrectly translated this word as “he” in Isaiah 53:7 to make it sound as if “he was stricken” and therefore speaking about a single individual, i.e., Jesus.

Furthermore, Christian missionaries incorrectly change the role of the messiah from a physical human redeemer from oppression and exile to a spiritual [divine] savior from sin.

Although all Jewish commentators believe that the straightforward identification of the servant in Isaiah 53 is Israel,<sup>5</sup> some, on an allegorical level, identify the servant as the messiah. They do so because, as a member of the Jewish people, the messiah can bear the responsibility to alleviate a portion of the punishment on behalf of the rest of the nation.<sup>6</sup>

A similar example of this concept is found in Numbers 4:19-20, where the children of Kehat bear the responsibility of carrying the Ark, at considerable risk to themselves, on behalf of the rest of the nation, so no one else would die. Amazingly, just before Isaiah 53, Israel is referred to as “*bearers of the vessels of the Lord*” (Isaiah 52:11).

In contrast to Christian belief, no Jewish commentary claims that the messiah will die for our sins or that we need to believe in, or even know about him, to benefit from his suffering. Even without our knowledge, the messiah’s suffering, as well as the suffering of other righteous Jews, can alleviate some portion of the nation’s suffering.

It is also noteworthy that under the influence of paganism, the early Christians also transformed the messiah into a deity. The Christian beliefs that the messiah dies for our sins and is divine are foreign to Judaism and not based on the Tanach.

I have attempted to present a brief overview of Isaiah 53 and how missionaries distort the original text to fit Jesus into the picture.<sup>7</sup> This overview also demonstrates the danger of reading passages or a chapter out of context.<sup>8</sup>

As King Solomon wisely stated, “*The first to present his argument sounds correct, until someone cross-examines him*” (Proverbs 18:17).

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<sup>1</sup> Although missionaries attribute this claim to an obscure “17<sup>th</sup> century Jewish historian, Raphael Levy” they fail to produce evidence of his statement. Interestingly, one Jew matching Levy’s description refused to accept Christianity and died a martyr.

<sup>2</sup> “*God will lay bare His holy arm in the sight of all the nations*” (Isaiah 52:10). God’s “arm” is associated with His redemption, as in, “*I will redeem you with an outstretched arm*” (Exodus 6:6).

<sup>3</sup> “*Kings will shut their mouths...For they will see what they have not been told*” (Isaiah 52:15).

<sup>4</sup> In my opinion, this explanation is partly substantiated by the events of March 2000 when Pope John Paul II—leader of the world’s almost one billion Roman Catholics—asked for forgiveness for the unspeakable suffering Jews endured at the hands of Christians. This event is especially relevant considering how nearly every nation of the United Nations unjustly and disproportionality condemns Israel at every opportunity.

<sup>5</sup> Some missionaries claim that the opinion that the servant is Israel did not appear until the Middle Ages, in the biblical commentary of Rashi (1040-1105). However, this argument is disproven by Christian scholar Origen (185 – 253), who wrote in his 3<sup>rd</sup> century *Contra Celsum*, “*All this the Jew said that these prophecies referred to the whole people as though a single individual.*”

<sup>6</sup> Alleviating communal punishment is not the same as removing someone’s sin, which remains the individual’s responsibility.

<sup>7</sup> For a more in-depth explanation of Isaiah 53, visit <https://jewsforjudaism.org/knowledge/articles/isaiah-53-verse-verse> and <https://jewsforjudaism.org/knowledge/videos/who-is-the-servant-of-god-isaiah-speaks-about>

<sup>8</sup> To demonstrate this point, we could claim that there is a forbidden passage in the New Testament that Christians do not want anyone to read, and point to Luke 14:26, where Jesus said, “*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother and wife and children..., he cannot be my disciple.*” Missionaries would respond that Luke 14:26 is not a forbidden passage and needs to be read in context and in the original language to be understood correctly. Similarly, the same standards apply to understanding Isaiah 53.