

Lesson 34 Isaiah 53 Interpretations of the Fourth Servant Song

Introduction

Who has believed our message? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

I have twice read Isaiah 53 at student meetings without giving any indication of which part of the Bible I was reading. I asked my audience to tell me who wrote the text and who it was about. Except for a handful of participants who knew I was reading from Isaiah 53, everyone else guessed the text came from a New Testament author, most said the Apostle Paul. And almost everyone said the author was speaking about Jesus.

It is very hard, if you have knowledge of the Christian story, not to hear Jesus in Isaiah 53. As a Christian, this is what I hear.

“The servant will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted (52:13).” Jesus was lifted up on a cross, Jesus was lifted up from the grave. Jesus was lifted up into Heaven. He is thrice exalted.

“The servant will be marred in his appearance (52:14).” Jesus was bloodied and bruised.

“Who has believed our message? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed (53:1)?” The message of a suffering Messiah was broadly rejected. Jesus’ own followers wanted a victorious king, not a suffering servant.

“He grew up before him like a tender shoot and like a root out of dry ground (53:2).” Jesus is the Messianic Son of David on whom the Spirit of the Lord rests, the root and shoot of Isaiah 11:1. And He grew up from dry ground, born in a stable and growing up in the backwater of Nazareth.

“He has no stately form or majesty that we should be attracted to Him (53:2).” Jesus was born to poor parents without special outward appearance.

“He was forsaken. Like one from whom men hide their face He was despised, and we did not esteem Him (53:3).” The cross, as an instrument of humiliation, shamed Jesus in the eyes of men and made Him one to be shunned.

“Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted (53:4).” Because of the manner of His death, Jesus was presumed rejected by God. God has stricken Him.

“He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities (53:5).” The word, “pierced,” stands out as a rare word in Isaiah and matches literally Jesus’ death on a cross where Roman soldiers pierced His hands, pierced His feet, and pierced His side with a spear.

“All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way (53:6).” Using “we,” Isaiah describes God’s people Israel as having gone astray. Israel is not the Servant. Jesus’ disciples exemplified this when they scattered at His arrest.

“He was oppressed and He was afflicted, like a lamb that is led to slaughter, yet He did not open His mouth (53:7).” Pilate was surprised at this very thing. Jesus did not argue for His defense. He remained silent and He was led away.

“And as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people (53:8).” Peter declared of Jesus’ generation in Jerusalem, “You disowned the Holy and Righteous one and asked for a murderer to be granted to you (Acts 3:14).”

“His grave was assigned with wicked men, yet He was with a rich man in His death (53:9).” Jesus should have been buried with the wicked in the grave of a thief, and yet Joseph and Nicodemus were given the right to bury His body, which they did by placing Him in a rich man’s tomb.

“He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth...the righteous one (53:9, 11).” Again this is not Israel. All people sin. Jesus is the Sinless One, the pure and spotless sacrifice.

“He would render himself as a guilt offering (53:10).” John the Baptist proclaimed of Jesus, “Behold the Lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world.”

“He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days and the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in his hand (53:10).” Though Jesus died, he also came back to life. “His offspring” are all who have believed. His days are prolonged for eternity. The good pleasure of the Lord is shown by the vindication of the resurrection and ascension into Heaven.

“By His knowledge he will justify the many (53:11).” No one was justified by the substitute of a goat or lamb. Jesus is the true human substitute who fulfills the legal requirement necessary to justify the many.

“He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; Yet He Himself bore the sin of many. (53:12)” That is fundamental to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus died to pay the penalty of our sin.

“And interceded for the transgressors (53:12).” He has ascended to the right hand of God, where He intercedes as the one true mediator between God the Father and His people.

For me as a Christian, Isaiah’s prophecy is the clearest of many Old Testament prophecies that give witness to the fact that Jesus Christ is God’s plan for the salvation of the world. Along with the prophecy in Isaiah 7 that a child would be born of a virgin; and in Isaiah 9 that his name would be, “wonderful counselor, mighty God, eternal Father, prince of peace,” we see Isaiah pointing us to something truly new. How can a man be sinless? And how can he die as a substitute - not for one, but for everyone? Just as the true and eternal King must be a man and must be more than a man, the true and sufficient sacrifice must be a man and must be more than a man. As the incarnate Son of God, Jesus is sinless, righteous man, and infinite God able to substitute for the many.

That’s my response to Isaiah 53. There are other interpretations. In this lesson I am going to address three categories of interpretation: the Critical Historian’s interpretation, Jewish interpretation, and New Testament interpretations.

We begin with the Critical Historian’s interpretation of Isaiah 53.

The Critical Historian’s interpretation of Isaiah 53.

The Critical Historian’s interpretation is rather easy, especially the early twentieth century position. Isaiah did not write this. Not only is this not the original Isaiah; this is not any Isaiah. This is not a Jew who lived before Jesus. It’s simply way too Christian. Prophecy like this does not happen. Christian scribes obviously came back and adjusted this text once or multiple times after the first century AD.

That’s a hard claim to defend against. How do we prove the veracity of the Old Testament text? How do we know that the words we have here are Isaiah’s words and have not been tampered with or added to through the centuries? At the beginning of the twentieth century, the oldest manuscript of Isaiah dated back only to 900 AD. 900 years after Jesus lived, and 1600 years after Isaiah lived. How can we have any assurance that the text was not corrupted?

The high reverence Jews have for the text of Scripture is one of the reasons we do not have older manuscripts. Damaged or worn out texts were not deemed appropriate for reading on the Sabbath. But those texts were too holy to simply stack in storage or use for some other purpose. So, Jewish communities began to bury these worn out and damaged texts with the same honor and respect as given to a person who has died.

The Jewish practice of burying texts that have deteriorated goes back at least to Rabbi Rava of the 4th century AD. He is quoted in the Talmud, the central commentary of Rabbinic Judaism, as saying, “A Torah scroll that became worn out is interred and buried next to a Torah scholar,”¹ That practice became a rule in Judaism.

This reverence for the Scripture also positively affected the Jewish method of transcribing a new copy of a manuscript. The primary tradition that provides us with texts of the Old Testament is the

¹ <https://www.sefaria.org/Megillah.26b.16> (accessed 10/24/2022).

Masoretic tradition. The Masoretic manuscripts were transcribed by medieval Jewish scholars active from 600-950 AD.² The Masoretes produced a system of rules for accurate transcription that included, for example, a record of the correct number of words that should exist in every book of the Bible, and what word should be located at the very middle of every book. Every word of every new manuscript was counted and every middle word of every book checked. A wrong count was to result in the rejection of the transcription. So, even though we do not have the original text of Isaiah, we do have a long tradition of linked manuscripts that, at least in theory, should faithfully preserve the text. Still, how do we prove that? In the first half of the 20th century, the oldest manuscript copy of Isaiah was contained in the Aleppo Codex dated 900 AD. How do we prove that no Christian tradition found its way into the transcription of that Hebrew manuscript? How do we prove there were no changes over a 900-year period?

Jewish scholars could make an argument for us by documenting the accuracy of Hebrew transcription through the centuries, and by pointing to a variety of manuscripts in a number of translated languages that do not differ in any significant way in regard to the text of Isaiah.

But the real proof came in 1947, when a Palestinian shepherd boy throwing rocks into a cave discovered ancient texts preserved in clay jars near the Dead Sea. The greatest find was a complete manuscript of Isaiah dated by non-Christian scholars to the second century BC. About 200 years before the birth of Christ and more than 1000 years older than the Aleppo Codex version of Isaiah. The text of that ancient Dead Sea scroll lines up essentially as the medieval Aleppo manuscript - apart from minor, minor differences.

The Critical Historian's argument was proven wrong. Isaiah 53 could not have been influenced by Christian authors, because the Dead Sea Isaiah scroll proves that Isaiah 53 existed at least two hundred years before Jesus lived. As astounding as it may be, the prophetic details regarding Jesus in Isaiah 53 are very real. It simply will not do to presuppose, uncritically, that God cannot foretell what is going to come, and thus automatically deny that Isaiah really did write all of this 700 years before the birth of Jesus.

Now, that's not something Jewish interpreters are going to deny. They do not deny that this is truly Isaiah. But is there another way to interpret this text? So let's turn to possible Jewish interpretations of Isaiah 53.

Jewish interpretations of Isaiah 53

I am not going to take time to go verse by verse and make a strong Jewish argument for an alternative interpretation of Isaiah 53. And I know that's not fair because at the beginning I went through verse by verse with a Christian view of Isaiah 53. But my goal is not to make a strong Jewish argument. That argument needs to be made by those who are not so biased as I am. I am, admittedly, completely convinced that Isaiah delivers here a prophecy about Jesus. My goal here is not to make the Jewish argument. Rather, my goal is to make Christians aware of the approach some Jewish interpreters have taken. I am not a student of the original Jewish sources so I'm going to get to the original sources through one particular book, *The Gospel According to Isaiah 53: Encountering the Suffering Servant in Jewish and Christian Theology*, edited by Darrell Bock and Mitch Glaser. I am particularly referencing Michael Brown's chapter titled, *Jewish Interpretations of Isaiah 53*. That is where all my quotes are going to come from.

Brown focuses on two streams of interpretation. The first interprets the servant as the Messiah. The second interprets the servant as Israel.

² D. Longacre. "Masoretes" in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.). (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

The Servant is the Messiah

Brown provides nine important references from Jewish sources referring to the servant in Isaiah 53 as the Messiah. The oldest is from Targum Jonathan. A targum is an official translation of the Hebrew text into Aramaic, the language Jews of the time understood. So it could be read along with the Hebrew in the synagogue and people understood what was being read. Targum Jonathan dates back to the second century before Christ, so right around the dating of that Dead Sea scroll. Brown writes, “Targum Jonathan interprets Isaiah 53 with reference to the Messiah, but with a fairly radical reworking of the text, emphasizing the Messiah’s victory rather than his suffering, and with some application of the text to the nation of Israel as a whole.”³ That is an interesting example from well before the birth of Christ to a Jewish tendency to downplay any aspect of suffering or death experienced by the Messiah.

Some other examples that interpret the servant in Isaiah as the Messiah include the Midrash Tanchuma, which applies the servant’s exaltation in 52:13 and the servant’s suffering in 53:3 to the Messiah. The famous Rabbi Maimonides who also served as the personal physician of Saladin interprets the shoot and root reference in Isaiah 53:2 as the Messiah.⁴ Brown also provides an often quoted comment from Rabbi Moseh Alshech of the sixteenth century, “[o]ur rabbis with one voice accept and affirm the opinion that the prophet is speaking of the Messiah, and we shall ourselves also adhere to the same view.”⁵

So, there does exist a solid Jewish voice that predates Jesus and carries through the Middle Ages which interprets the servant in Isaiah 53 as the Messiah, an individual who is the Son of David, but who is not Jesus Christ and who has not yet come. That interpretation, however, is not the predominate modern Jewish interpretation.

The Servant is Israel

Jewish thinkers predominately interpret the servant in Isaiah 53 as the people Israel. Brown traces this interpretation back to the so-called “big three” commentators writing in the eleventh and twelfth centuries: Rashi, Ibn Ezra and Radak.⁶

I made reference myself in our previous lesson to an example that supports a corporate view of Isaiah 53. In chapter 1, Isaiah represents the nation of Judah as a man beaten from head to foot. I connected that image to the disfigurement of the servant described in Isaiah 52:14. Isaiah poetically symbolizes corporate groups as individuals. So there’s Judah as the beaten man, and there’s Babylon as a queen who is humbled, and Zion as a barren wife who has many children. So it’s possible that the servant spoken of as a singular person could symbolically represent Israel. It is up to us, the readers, to discern from the context whether Isaiah is speaking of an individual, or whether the individual represents a group.

Sometimes the same reference is used in one context to refer to a corporate group, and in another context to refer to a singular individual. The virgin who will have a son in 7:14 shall name him, Immanuel. That Immanuel is an individual child. But then in the description of Assyria’s overflowing Judah in 8:18, Isaiah says its waters will “fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.” That sounds like a reference to corporate Judah as Immanuel. The idea of a servant has been applied in our current context to both corporate Israel the servant, and by implication to the individual, Cyrus. Even the name “Israel,” which we would expect to always refer corporately to the people, seems to be applied to an individual in the Second Servant song. “He said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel (49:3).’”

³ M. L. Brown. “Jewish Interpretations of Isaiah 53” in *The Gospel according to Isaiah 53: Encountering the Suffering Servant in Jewish And Christian Theology*, D. L. Bock & M. Glaser (Eds.). (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2012) 62.

⁴ Brown, 63.

⁵ Brown, 63.

⁶ Brown, 64.

That last example may be begging the question: if the ideal servant should always be taken as corporate Israel, then that reference in 49:3 is not an individual servant Israel, but is the corporate servant Israel. But that is the point. Context must guide our understanding of whether Isaiah is using an individual to personify a group, or whether Isaiah is actually speaking about an individual.

Ibn Ezra argued that the long text about Israel that comes before the fourth Servant Song, and the response by Israel that comes after the fourth Servant Song both provide a contextual basis for interpreting the servant as corporate Israel. He wrote,

This [passage] is an extremely difficult one. Our opponents say that it refers to their God, supposing the '*servant*' to signify his body: this, however, is not possible, for the body cannot 'understand' even during a man's lifetime. Moreover, if their view be correct, what will be the meaning of 'seeing [his] seed?' for he (their God) saw no son; or of 'prolonging days,' which is equally untrue of him; or of 'dividing the spoil with the strong?' The proof of its proper meaning lies in the passages immediately before (52:12, where 'you' signifies Israel), and immediately afterwards (54:1, where 'the barren one' designates the congregation of Israel); similarly *my servant* means each individual belonging to Israel, and consequently, God's servant, who is in exile [...] Several of these verses, however, have then no meaning [if this is the Messiah], for instance, 'despised and forlorn of men,' 'taken from prison and judgment,' 'made his grave with the wicked,' 'will see seed and prolong days.' [...] But in my judgment the [passage] is more intimately connected with the context [...] In fact, he is simply speaking of each one of God's servants who is in exile; or, which is more probable, 'my servant' may mean Israel as a whole, as in 41:8.⁷

This paragraph from Ibn Ezra presents two general arguments. First, context allows us to interpret the servant corporally as Israel. Second, the description of the servant does not match what is known of Jesus. I would argue that context does not allow us to identify Israel with the servant. I agree with Ibn Ezra that Israel is the subject of what comes before and what comes after Isaiah 53. But the servant is set up as a contrast to Israel and as the solution for Israel's sin.

I would also argue that the points at which the passage does not seem to match Jesus are only valid if you reject the incarnation, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus which, understandably, Ibn Ezra does. Those mysteries belong to what will be new when the arm of the Lord is revealed and not what is made known here through Isaiah. But when those mysteries are accepted, what has been made known by Isaiah all falls logically in place.

Interpreting the servant as Israel creates the problem of how Israel's suffering counted as a substitute for others. Radak provides a creative solution, arguing that Israel does not bear the sin of the Gentiles. That statement in Isaiah 53:4 should be taken as Gentiles mistakenly imagining that Israel bore their sin. Radak explains,

"[I]t is not asserted that Israel actually bore the iniquity of the Gentiles, but the latter only imagine it to be the case when they see, at the time of [their] deliverance, that the faith which Israel adhered to was the true one, while that they themselves had adhered to was the false."⁸

Rashi, on the other hand, has no problem recognizing the text as substitutionary. He wrote,

"But now we see that this came to him not because of his low state, but that he was chastised with pains so that all the nations be atoned for with Israel's suffering. The illness that should rightfully have come upon us, he bore We thought that he was hated by the Omnipresent, but he was not so, but he was pained because of our transgressions and crushed because of our iniquities."⁹

⁷ Brown, 65-66.

⁸ Brown, 69-70.

⁹ Brown, 70.

Israel, or the righteous remnant within Israel, somehow suffers pain, persecution, suffering, and death for the sake of others.

This raises the primary tension for Jewish interpreters who do not recognize the servant as the future Messiah, whether Jesus or another to come. Faithful exegesis of the text requires admission that the servant suffers and dies as a substitute for the sin of others. We cannot get around that. And yet, it is not clear how Israel's suffering in exile could have accomplished healing, both for Israel and for the nations. We can understand that Jewish believers are not going to allow us to solve some of the challenges in the text by pointing to the incarnation of Jesus. They are not going to believe that God can have appeared in the flesh. And they do not accept the concept of the Trinity. But perhaps common ground, a beginning for discussion can be found in the substitutionary nature of the servant. And perhaps we can argue that atonement for the nations can only be accomplished through the Messiah.

New Testament interpretation

Moving from Jewish interpretation of Isaiah 53, let's consider New Testament interpretations. This fourth Servant Song is the most quoted passage by Isaiah in the New Testament. And it is not the case of one verse being quoted many times. Ten quotes of the Song in the New Testament include 9 of the song's 15 verses. The song is quoted in each of the four Gospels, once in Acts, twice in Romans, and three times in 1 Peter. The six authors who wrote these books, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, and Peter account for 95% of the New Testament. They all knew this Isaiah 53.

The influence of the Song goes far beyond direct quotes. The language of Isaiah 53 echoes in the Passion narratives in all the Gospels, the justification language in Romans and Galatians, and the fulfillment of sacrifice explained in Hebrews. My goal here is to provide you with a summary of ten direct quotes and a few examples of important allusions.

Matthew 8:17 quoting Isaiah 53:4

I will address the quotations in order of appearance in the New Testament, starting with Matthew. I will spend a little extra time on this first one because it raises an interesting controversy and in doing so provides an important principle for understanding the use of the Old Testament by New Testament authors.

Matthew 8:1-16 records a series of healings performed by Jesus. Jesus heals a leper, the servant of a Roman centurion, Peter's mother, many who are demon possessed, and all who came to Him sick. Matthew sums up these miracles by quoting Isaiah 53:4, "He himself took our infirmities and carried away our diseases." That word, "infirmities," can be translated as "griefs," in Isaiah, but is more literally translated as "sickness." Isaiah repeats the word in Isaiah 53:3, 4, and 10.

I remember discussing the implication of that translation with a friend when I was in college. We were walking along the beach in Florida on spring break. He argued that Isaiah's words show that Jesus bore, not only our sin on the cross when He died, but also our sickness. He understood this to mean freedom from sickness is the right of every Christian by faith. If you truly believe that Jesus died for your sickness, you will be healed just the same as if you truly believe that Jesus died for your sin, you will be forgiven. He supported that view with this quote from Matthew 8:17. Matthew says, as a summary of all the healings Jesus performed, that Jesus has taken our infirmity.

There is another way to understand Matthew's point. There is a definite linking between the healings Jesus performs and His taking on Himself all of our sickness. But even when a New Testament author makes a specific quote of an Old Testament text, he expects the reader to consider the whole context of the quote. D. A. Carson makes that point in his commentary on Matthew. He writes, "It is generally understood since the work of C.H. Dodd [...] that when the New Testament quotes a brief

Old Testament passage, it often refers implicitly to the entire context of the quotation. This is very likely here for Matthew has a profound understanding of the Old Testament.”¹⁰

And so when we do that, when we go back and study the context of Isaiah 53, we see that the focus is on Jesus bearing our sin on the cross. He is pictured as a guilt offering, a substitute for sin. The focus of the entire Book of the Servant is on the need for national deliverance, and the greater need for spiritual deliverance. There is very little focus on healing or deliverance from sickness. Jesus bore all of our sorrows, all of our griefs, all of our sins by substituting Himself as a human servant in the place of human beings weighed down by brokenness. That brokenness, which includes our sickness, is fundamentally the result of human sin. But as we continue on in Isaiah, we are going to see that we have to look ahead to a future time when death and sorrow are completely banished. And as is made clear in the New Testament, that does not happen with the cross. The penalty of sin has been dealt with by the cross. The power of sin no longer has lost its mastery because of the cross. But the presence of sin is still very real. Our bodies continue to decay. Everyone grows old from sickness and disease, no matter how much they believe in the cross. Corruption of this physical world will not end until after the second coming of Jesus Christ and the restoration of a New Heaven and a New Earth, where we will have new bodies.

In Matthew, the healing of Jesus teaches us three things about Jesus. First, He has compassion on us in our brokenness and sorrows. Second, He has power over our brokenness. Third, by healing in the present, He points ahead to full restoration in the future when His kingdom fully comes.

Let's move on to Mark.

Mark 15:28 quoting Isaiah 53:12

The quote from Mark 15:28 is more directly about the crucifixion of Jesus. The previous verse reports, “They crucified two robbers with him, one on His right and one on his left. Then Mark 15:28 quotes Isaiah 53:12, saying, “And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘And he was numbered with transgressors.’” This is actually a debatable verse in Mark because it does not appear in the earliest manuscripts. But even if it is not an attestation of a New Testament writer, it is still the attestation of an early Christian scribe who saw Jesus in Isaiah 53 and inserted this note, which at some point was included as part of the text.

Luke 22:37 quoting Isaiah 53:12

Luke's quote in 22:37 is interesting because it is a report of Jesus quoting Isaiah 53:12 about Himself. The quote occurs on the night of Jesus' arrest, just before He takes His disciples to the Garden of Gethsemane. There, Jesus will pray, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not My will, but yours be done.” And then He will be arrested. Just before that, Jesus applies Isaiah 53:12 to Himself, saying, “For I tell you that this which is written must be fulfilled in Me, ‘And he was numbered with transgressors’; for that which refers to Me has its fulfillment.”

If Jesus quotes just one verse from Isaiah 53 on the night of His arrest, He also had the whole of Isaiah 53 on His mind. He sees fully the suffering and death Isaiah prophesied when He asks God to remove the cup of suffering. And when He says, “yet not My will, but yours be done,” He is communicating His readiness to embrace that suffering and fulfill the role of the Servant, to die as one man for the sins of many.

John 12:38 quoting Isaiah 53:1

John's quote of Isaiah 53 occurs in 12:38, a transitional point of his Gospel. Jesus has completed His public ministry at the end of chapter 11. In chapter 13 Jesus makes final preparations for His disciples at the last supper. In chapter 12, the transition from public ministry to the Passion week, Jesus is anointed by Mary, enters triumphantly into Jerusalem, and announces, “The hour has come

¹⁰ D. A. Carson. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.). (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984) 205.

for the son of man to be glorified.” The chapter ends with a summary of Jesus’ public ministry in His own words. But just before that summary, John adds a paragraph explaining why so few Jews had truly believed in Jesus. This is where we get the quote from Isaiah 53:1. It’s in John 12:37–38,

But though He had performed so many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him. *This was* to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet which he spoke: “LORD, WHO HAS BELIEVED OUR REPORT? AND TO WHOM HAS THE ARM OF THE LORD BEEN REVEALED?”

John follows that up with a quote from Isaiah vision and calling in chapter 6, where God told Isaiah to expect a lack of reception to his message. Quoting Isaiah 6:10 John writes,

³⁹ For this reason they could not believe, for Isaiah said again, ⁴⁰ “He has blinded their eyes and He hardened their heart, so that they would not see with their eyes and perceive with their heart, and be converted and I heal them (John 12:39-40).”

John then contrasts Isaiah’s faith and the faith of the religious leaders in Jesus’ day.

⁴¹ These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him. ⁴² Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing *Him*, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; ⁴³ for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God (John 12:41-43).

When John references Isaiah seeing the glory of God, he is speaking about the broader context of Isaiah 6, which he has just quoted. Isaiah saw God’s robe filling the Temple and His glory filling the Earth. This idea of seeing the glory of God is important to John from the beginning. He says in 1:14, “and the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” John is speaking there about the incarnation of Jesus, using the language of Exodus. Jesus dwelt or tabernacled among us in a way similar to how the glory of God descended upon and shone forth from the tabernacle.

And a study will show us that John’s language in the first 18 verses of the Gospel rely heavily on Genesis and Exodus. We are seeing now in chapter 12 that John’s understanding of the Torah, of the books of Moses are influenced also be the later revelation of the prophets, particularly Isaiah. Seeing God’s glory in Jesus Christ is both an Exodus reference and an Isaiah reference. And that is made clear to us by John’s direct quotes of Isaiah 6 and Isaiah 53. But recognizing that, we now have cause to start wondering about the rest of John’s language that overlaps with Isaiah, language like, see; light; glory; sign. There are words woven through Isaiah and also through John.

That brings me to one more connection in John that I am particularly excited about that occurs right before this passage. Jesus has said, “The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified.” Then he declares in 12:32, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” That’s an important statement in John.

It is the third “lifted up” statement by Jesus that John records. All three communicate what is called, “the irony of John.” To be lifted up is to be exalted. This is language that applies to a king. Caesar is lifted up. Jesus will be lifted up, not in glory, but in shame. And yet, that which is intended to shame Jesus, the cross, will result in the glorious display of His justice and love. God reverses what humans meant for shame and reveals instead the glory and power of His name.

That’s the message of Isaiah 53, the enigma. Irony in John, enigma in Isaiah, it is the same truth with even the same language. You have three times in John, Jesus says He will be lifted up. That verb, “lifted up,” is the same Greek word used in the Septuagint version of Isaiah 52:13, which declares, “Behold, My servant will prosper, He will be high and lifted up and greatly exalted.”

Radak, one of the famous rabbis of the 12th century I quoted earlier, picked up on the lifted up language. He wrote, concerning Isaiah 53,

I should like to ask the Nazarenes who explain this [passage] of Jesus, how the prophet could have said, ‘He shall be lifted up and lofty exceedingly?’ If this alludes to the flesh, Jesus was not ‘lifted

up' except when he was suspended upon the cross; if it refers to the Godhead, then he was mighty and lifted up from the beginning.¹¹

Radak has understood that there is an enigma. And he has rejected the Christian solution for that enigma. John reads Isaiah 52:13 and he understands how the servant will both suffer and be lifted up. Jesus was high, lifted up, greatly exalted. Lifted up on a cross, lifted up from the grave, lifted up into Heaven.

Acts 8:32-33 quoting Isaiah 53:7-8

Moving from the Gospels to Acts, Luke records a fascinating reference to Isaiah 53. An Ethiopian eunuch, court official to Queen Candace no less, is traveling back from Jerusalem to Ethiopia, reading a scroll of Isaiah, a scroll that must have been practically identical to the one found in the Dead Sea caves. And God, as He often does, creates a divine encounter, bringing Philip up by the Ethiopian chariot at just the right moment to hear the man reading Isaiah 53:7-8. This is Acts 8:30-35.

³⁰ Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹ And he said, “Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

He was led as a sheep to slaughter; And as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
So He does not open His mouth.
In humiliation His judgment was taken away; Who will relate His generation?
For His life is removed from the earth.

The eunuch answered Philip and said, “Please *tell me*, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?” Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him.

Interestingly, the Ethiopian gives us another way to interpret Isaiah 53, which some do. He asks, “Is this the prophet?” So, is the servant – Isaiah? Philip clearly saw Jesus in Isaiah 53. And judging by his baptism, the Ethiopian court official came to see Jesus in these verses as well. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – they all saw Jesus in Isaiah 53. How about Peter and Paul?

Romans 10:16 and 15:21 quoting Isaiah 53:1 and 52:15

Paul quotes the fourth Servant Song twice in Romans. In our series on Isaiah, we've already noted Paul quoting and alluding to other verses in Isaiah. In fact, Paul quotes Isaiah 19 times in Romans and 13 times in other letters.

In Romans 10:16, Paul uses 53:1, “Who has believed our message?” as he explains the rejection of Jesus by contemporary Jews.

In Romans 15:21, Paul applies 52:15, “For what had not been told them they will see, and what they have not heard they will understand,” to his own missionary strategy. Isaiah says kings will see and understand. Paul believes that. He believes God has called him to those who have not heard, because there are many among them who will understand and believe if only someone will proclaim to them the Good News about Jesus.

To give you one more example of an allusion to Isaiah that is not a direct quote, Paul writes in Romans 5:19, “For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the one the many will be justified.” I believe Paul’s language suggests an allusion to Isaiah 53:11, “By his knowledge the righteous one, my servant, will justify the many.” Paul says, “The righteous one will justify many. Isaiah says, “Through the one many will be justified.”

Finally, let's look at Peter.

¹¹ Brown, (66).

1 Peter 2:22, 24 and 25 quoting Isaiah 53:9, 5 and 6

Peter clearly interprets Isaiah 53 as prophecy of Jesus. Peter encourages fellow believers to consider the example of Christ as a motivation to persevere as they go through their own trials. Instead of describing the suffering of Jesus in his own words, Peter turns to Isaiah 53. By looking at Isaiah 53, we are also reminded that God is sovereign in Jesus' suffering. This was the plan 700 years before the birth of Christ. And just as God is sovereign over the suffering of Christ, God is sovereign over our trials as well. Peter's words come in 1 Peter 2:21-25 and include Isaiah 53:5, 6, and 9.

²¹ For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, ²² WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; ²³ and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously; ²⁴ and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. ²⁵ For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls.

Conclusion

Having summarized all these quotes from New Testament authors, I realize I have set up a distinction that's not fully accurate. The New Testament interpretation of Isaiah 53 is not in contrast to Jewish interpretations. With the exception of Luke, these authors were all sincere Jews. Their understanding of Jesus belongs under the category of Jewish interpretations as another option. We considered two primary Jewish options: first, that the servant is the Messiah who has not yet come; and second, that the servant is Israel. A third Jewish option is represented by the Jewish authors of the New Testament, namely, that the servant of Isaiah 53 is the Messiah and the Messiah is Jesus.

It does make sense for us today to separate the Jewish interpretation from the Christian interpretation. Very early, within the first century, the Christian faith shifted from being a Jewish alternative to become a distinct, primarily non-Jewish faith. But we should never forget that the Christian faith is firmly founded in the Old Testament and in the Jewish hope of a Messiah who will come to reign, and, according to Isaiah, will also come to die.

Who has believed our message? To whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? The problem, according to Isaiah, is not a problem of reason or education. The problem is in the heart. We human beings simply will not see that which we do not want to see. Our eyes are dim and our hearing bad. We have a spiritual problem with God. A disciple is one whose eyes have been opened to see what is right there in front of them, one whose ears have been opened to hear the sweet song of Jesus.

I'll close with John Oswalt's concluding words on Isaiah 53.

Christians look back at this passage from the vantage point of Christ with a piercing sense of recognition, perhaps like that which came to Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch [...]. In almost every word they see the face of their Savior and what had formerly been opaque becomes patently clear. If Isaiah had been compelled to produce a literal description of the life and character of the Servant/Messiah, would it have looked like Jesus of Nazareth? Probably not, but the points of contact between that life and ministry and this text are so many and various that they cannot be coincidental. Either the facts of Jesus' life were reshaped by a conspiracy of early Christian writers to make them conform to this text, a task so complex as to be unimaginable, or, much more simply, his life, death, and resurrection *did* so conform. The text must still be read through the eyes of faith, but with that faith the mystery is no longer about how it is possible for sinful humans to have a healthy and whole relationship with God. The only mystery is how God could love us like that.¹²

¹² J. N. Oswalt. *NICOT: The Book of Isaiah, Chs 40-66*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 407-408.