David Berger

Rashi on Isaiah 53: Exegetical Judgment or Response to the Crusade?

Few if any biblical passages have loomed larger in discussions between Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages and beyond than the challenging account of the "servant of the Lord" or "suffering servant" in Is 52:13–53:12. In order to address the issues before us clearly, we need to begin with a perusal of the text itself:

> **Chapter 52**
> [13] Behold, my servant will succeed; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.
> [14] Just as there were many who were astonished at you – his appearance was disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness –
> [15] so he will sprinkle [or startle] many nations. 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 behold.
>
> **Chapter 53**
> [1] Who has believed what we have heard, and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
> [2] He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no form or beauty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should find him pleasing.
> [3] He was despised, shunned by men, a man of suffering, and familiar with disease. As one who hid his face from us, he was despised, and we held him of no account.
> [4] Yet it was our sickness that he was bearing, our pains that he suffered,
> while we accounted him plagued, smitten and afflicted by God.
> (*Akhen ḥolayenu hu' naśa' u-makh'oveinu sevalam,*
> *Wa-anaḥnu ḥašavnuhu nagua' mukkeh Elohim u-me'unneh.*)
> [5] But he was wounded for [or from] our transgressions, he was crushed for [or from] our iniquities; He bore the chastisement that made us whole [literally: the chastisement of our peace (or wholeness) was upon him], and by his bruises we were healed.
> (*We-hu' meḥolal mi-peša'einu, medukka' me-'avonoteinu,*
> *musar šelomenu 'alaw, u-ba-ḥavurato nirpa' lanu*) [. . .]".
> [11] Out of his anguish, he will see and be satisfied;
> by his knowledge my righteous servant will make the many righteous, and he will suffer [or bear] their iniquities (*wa-'awonotam hu' yisbol*).
> [12] Therefore I will give him a portion among the many and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he exposed himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors, whereas he bore the sin of the many (*we-hu ḥeṭ' rabbim naśa'*), and made intercession for transgressors.

This was probably the most important passage for early Christians struggling with the paradox of the crucifixion, and the idea that Jesus died for others' sins may well have originated from this chapter. In confronting this difficult text, commen-

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110702262-014

tators and polemicists faced two key questions: “Who is the servant?” and “Why does he suffer?” For Christians, the answers were straightforward: the servant is the Messiah, identified, of course as Jesus, and he suffers to atone for the sins of humanity. For Jews, however, matters were far more complex.

The diverse Jewish responses to the question regarding the identity of the servant were the Messiah, the Jewish people, the righteous among the Jewish people, the individual righteous Jew, the prophet/author, and a different prophet. As to the cause of the suffering or its purpose, some Jews understood the text to affirm simply that the servant suffered *as a result* of the sinners’ actions . Thus, *ḥolayeinu hu’ naśa’* (v. 4) means that he bore the sickness that we inflicted on him. The same meaning can be ascribed to the essentially identical formula *we-hu ḥeṭ’ rabbim naśa’* (v. 12). *Makh’oveinu sevalam* (v. 4) means that he suffered the pain that we inflicted on him, as does *wa-ʿawonotam hu’ yisbol* (v. 11). Similarly, *meḥolal mi-pešaʿeinu*, *medukka’ me-ʿawonoteinu* (v. 5) does not mean “he was wounded *for* our transgressions, crushed *for* our iniquities,” but, in closer accordance with the usual meaning of the prepositional particle, “he was wounded *by* or *from* our transgressions, crushed *by* or *from* our iniquities.”

What made this understanding difficult was the line *musar šelomenu ʿalaw u-ba-ḥavurato nirpa’ lanu* (v. 5), whose plain meaning, expressed in the translation above, is “He bore the chastisement that made us whole” (or, more literally, “the chastisement of our peace [or wholeness] is upon him”), and by his bruises we were healed.” This appears incompatible with suffering that is merely a consequence of the oppressor’s misbehavior, but even these phrases can be rendered in a manner consistent with this understanding. A commentator who sees the servant as the prophet could take it to mean that the prophet’s teaching, which led the speakers to chastise him, brought about their peace, wholeness, and healing.[1] As we shall see below, even some commentators like Abraham ibn Ezra and Isaac Abarvanel who understood the servant to be Israel and took the key verses as assertions that Jews suffered *from* the iniquities of their persecutors were able to propose at least somewhat plausible interpretations of the second half of verse 5 that did not entail vicarious atonement.

1 This is more or less the first interpretation of R. Saʿadyah Gaon, who identified the servant as Jeremiah. See Joseph Alobaidi, ed. and trans., *The Messiah in Isaiah 53: The Commentaries of Saadia Gaon, Salmon ben Yeruḥam, and Yefet ben Eli on Is 52:13–53:12, Edition and Translation* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1998), 58. Harry Orlinsky, in a vigorous argument that the servant is the prophet/author and that vicarious atonement plays no role in this passage, affirmed this understanding without reference to Saʿadyah; see Harry M. Orlinsky, “The So-Called Suffering Servant In Isaiah 53,” in *Interpreting the Prophetic Tradition: The Goldenson Lectures, 1955–1966*, ed. Harry M. Orlinsky (New York: Ktav, 1969): 225–74.

Other Jewish commentators, however, understood verses 4 and 5 as asserting a theology that in a key sense was identical to that of the Christian interpretation: the servant suffers in order to atone for the sins of another party. Rashi's understanding of the passage has attracted particular attention. The servant is Israel, the speakers in chapter 53 are the nations of the world, and here is what they say:

> "It was our sickness that he was bearing" (v. 4): [. . .] He was afflicted by suffering so that all the nations should achieve atonement through the afflictions of Israel. He bore the sickness that should have come upon us [. . .]. "The chastisement of our peace was upon him" (v. 5): The afflictions for the peace that we experienced came upon him; that is, he was subjected to suffering so that peace should prevail for the entire world.

Generally speaking, scholars have believed that the prevailing position among Jews before Rashi was that the servant was the Messiah. The key references are the story in the Talmud (*Sanh.* 98a) where R. Joshua ben Levi encounters the Messiah at the gates of Rome suffering in a manner that clearly evokes Isaiah 53, a similar account in the seventh-century *Sefer Zerubbavel*, an explicit identification in the standard Aramaic Targum to the biblical passage, several homilies in *Pesiqta Rabbati*, and a striking liturgical poem for Yom Kippur (*Az mi-lifnei Berešit*) by R. Elazar be-Rabbi Qillir, where the Messiah, described in terms permeated by the language of Isaiah 53, bears the sins of Israel and thus brings them forgiveness.[2] For these scholars, it was Rashi who transformed the hitherto marginal identification with the Jewish people into the one that came to dominate subsequent Jewish exegesis and polemic. They were also struck by what appeared to be his innovative and theologically problematic position that the Jewish people vicariously atones for the sins of the nations of the world.

Rashi's stance, then, appeared to be crying out for an explanation with respect to both the identity of the servant and the reason for his suffering. The most systematic attempt to account for his interpretation remains a 1982 article in the *Harvard Theological Review* by Joel Rembaum, "The Development of a Jewish Exegetical Tradition regarding Isaiah 53."[3] For Rembaum, the collective interpretation of the servant was born out of three primary needs: 1) the need to deal with the problem of exile by "affirm[ing] [the Jews'] covenantal

2 The most recent and thorough discussion of these sources is that of Martha Himmelfarb, *Jewish Messiahs in the Christian Empire: A History of the Book of Zerubbabel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 66–98.

3 Joel Rembaum, "The Development of a Jewish Exegetical Tradition regarding Isaiah 53," *Harvard Theological Review* 75 (1982): 289–311.

relationship with God"; 2) the need to counter the Christian interpretation by avoiding the messianic understanding entirely; and 3) the need to provide an explanation for the horrific experiences visited upon the communities of the Rhineland during the First Crusade.[4] Much of Rembaum's subsequent analysis focuses on this last objective, which is achieved by combining the collective interpretation with the understanding that the text affirms vicarious atonement, and he points to the similar perspective proffered by Yitzḥak Baer and Ḥaim Hillel ben Sasson. Baer, for example, wrote that "the upheavals of the time caused Rashi to think deeply about accepted views," and he continues: "At the end of days, the nations will recognize and confess regarding Israel, 'It is our sickness that he was bearing, etc.'"[5]

Beyond the purported innovativeness of Rashi's interpretation and its presumed usefulness in explaining the tragedy of the Crusade, Rembaum points to the identification of the servant as the Messiah in Rashi's commentary on the Talmud. In a separate but related argument, he cites an article by Judah Rosenthal suggesting that the transition to collective understanding can plausibly be connected with the Crusade in light of a version of Rashi's commentary on Isaiah provided by Raymond Martini in his *Pugio Fidei*.[6] In that version, Rashi cites two rabbinic passages, one in the Talmud and one identified as a midrash haggadah that he heard, affirming the identification of the servant with the Messiah. In other words, Rashi initially identified the servant as the Messiah, but changed his mind in the wake of the Crusade. Avraham Grossman has also expressed his inclination to see Martini's report as an authentic record of an earlier position that Rashi re-thought because of the heightened Christian challenge connected with either the Crusade or the period that immediately preceded it.

It should be noted, however, that whether or not we consider Martini's version to be authentic, it presents Rashi as saying only that this is a rabbinic opinion: "Our Rabbis apply this to the Messiah" and "I have heard that there is a Midrash

---

4 Rembaum, "Development," 292–94.

5 Yitzḥak Baer, "Rashi we-ha-Meṣiʾut ha-Hisṭorit šel Zemanno," in *Sefer Rashi*, ed. Y.L. ha-Cohen Maimon (Jerusalem, 1946): 496.

6 Rembaum, "Development," 294, n. 19; Judah Rosenthal, "Ha-Pulmus ha-Anti-Noṣri be-Rashi ʿal ha-Tanakh," in Judah Rosenthal, *Meḥqarim u-Meqorot* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1967): 1:113. The relevant passage is in Raymond Martini, *Pugio Fidei Raymundi Martini ordinis praedicatorum adversus Mauros et Judaeos* (Paris, 1651), 311, 429. It was reproduced in Adolf Neubauer, ed., *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah according to the Jewish Interpreters I: Texts* (Oxford, 1877), 39–40, and translated into English in Samuel R. Driver and Adolf Neubauer, trans., *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah according to the Jewish Interpreters II: Translations* (Oxford, 1877), 39–40.

Aggadah." Moreover, nothing in Martini's report requires us to assume that the citation of these midrashim constituted the totality of Rashi's comments on the identity of the servant; indeed, such a position is impossible to maintain given the fact that Rashi surely interpreted the entire chapter. Rashi frequently cites a rabbinic interpretation and goes on to provide a different one of his own. In this case, Martini would have had no reason to report a subsequent passage in Rashi's commentary that provides a collective interpretation and every reason not to do so. If we accept the authenticity of Martini's report, the text in the extant manuscripts, which makes no reference to these midrashim, presumably results from a decision by an early Jewish copyist or by Rashi himself to erase his introductory citation of these midrashim so as to deprive Christians of ammunition or eliminate tension with the commentary that follows. The unlikely alternative is that Rashi completely replaced his earlier commentary, which referred the chapter to the Messiah, with the version that we now possess and that Martini, who had that earlier version, made no reference to it beyond its citation of the two midrashim. Finally, even if we conclude on the basis of this evidence that Rashi once accepted this opinion in his biblical commentary, the change need not have had anything to do with considerations that are extraneous to the text.

This point is particularly relevant in light of a liturgical poem by Rashi that has, to the best of my knowledge, gone unnoticed in the scholarly discourse on our question. There actually is a text in which Rashi appears to endorse the messianic interpretation of the servant. He composed a *seliḥah* that centers around a midrashic theme identifying seven entities created two thousand years before the world, one of which is the name of the Messiah. The single line characterizing this creation in Rashi's *seliḥah* is "the splendor of the name *Yinnon* wounded from sins (*meḥolal me-ḥovim*)."[7] This is a transparent reference to Isaiah 53 and indicates that at least for the purposes of his liturgical poem, Rashi was prepared to utilize the rabbinic identification of the servant. He may also have been following the model of Qillir's *Az mi-lifnei Berešit*, which was known in Rashi's France and is built upon that theme. While this line is certainly to be taken seriously in any discussion of Rashi's understanding of the servant, it falls short of demonstrating that he considered this the straightforward meaning of the biblical text. And – to reiterate – even if we conclude on the basis of this evidence that Rashi once accepted this opinion, the change need not have had anything to do with considerations that are extraneous to the text.

7 *Seder ha-Seliḥot ke-Minhag Liṭa'*, ed. Daniel Goldschmidt (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1965), 139.

There remains the evidence from the talmudic commentary, but this carries no weight whatsoever. There are many examples of differences in the interpretation of verses between Rashi's biblical and talmudic commentaries, and in this case, the most obvious explanation applies. A Talmud commentator must interpret the talmudic text in accordance with its own perception of the biblical text, and the relevant talmudic passage identifies the servant with the Messiah.

Finally, we cannot be certain that Rashi's commentary on Isaiah 53 was written after 1096. Baer's argument that the description of the brutal murder and humiliating burial of Jews who chose martyrdom in Rashi's commentary on Is 53:9 reflects the events of 1096, an argument endorsed by Avraham Grossman, does point in this direction, but it is not definitive.[8] The Jews of France and Germany had experienced serious attacks between 1007 and 1012, as well as in sporadic episodes during the course of the eleventh century, leading – according to some reports – to classic instances of martyrdom, and Ashkenazic authors gave expression to these experiences before the Crusade. It cannot be entirely ruled out that Rashi's description of horrific killings may reflect the memory of those events.

How, then, might we go about evaluating the suggestion that Rashi's interpretation was driven by the need to explain the tragedy of the Crusade? There are, I think, several questions that we might fruitfully pose. Is his interpretation really strikingly innovative? If so, that makes it more likely that it was triggered by an external development, though this is not necessarily the case. Did he see vicarious atonement as an unproblematic doctrine, or did he find it theologically troubling? Is it reasonable to assume that his normal instincts as to the plain meaning of the text could have produced his interpretation without resort to external factors? Are there alternative interpretations he could have proffered that are manifestly – or even not so manifestly – superior to his from the perspective of a medieval seeker of straightforward meaning (*pešaṭ*)? If so, he probably chose this one out of a consideration other than *pešaṭ* – though we must always remind ourselves that our instincts and his could very well diverge. Is his interpretation one that he would have found attractive as a response to the religious challenge posed by the sufferings of the First Crusade?

---

8 Avraham Grossman, "The Commentary of Rashi on Isaiah and the Jewish-Christian Debate," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish Intellectual and Social History: Festschrift in Honor of Robert Chazan*, ed. David Engel, Lawrence H. Schiffman, and Elliot R. Wolfson (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012): 59. The argument that Rashi's commentary on this verse reflects the Crusade experience was also noted by Rosenthal, "Ha-Pulmus ha-Anti-Noṣri," 104, and by Harvey Sicherman and Gilad J. Gevaryahu, "Rashi and the First Crusade: Commentary, Liturgy, Legend," *Judaism* 48 (1999): 184.

Let us begin with the first question. Is Rashi's explanation strikingly innovative? With respect to the identification of the servant with Israel, it is considerably less innovative than scholars have generally assumed. Rembaum himself noted some earlier evidence for this identification.[9] Recently, Elliot Horowitz pointed to five additional Jewish texts that precede Rashi where the servant represents the Jewish people in exile: an Arabic commentary on Psalms by the tenth-century Karaite Salmon ben Yeruḥam; the well-known Passover poem *Beraḥ Dodi* by the tenth-century Italian poet Solomon ha-Bavli; a penitential prayer by the same author; a penitential prayer by Solomon's older contemporary Amittai ben Shephaṭiah of Oria; and another penitential prayer by Rashi's older contemporary Meir ben Isaac of Worms.[10]

Moreover, many modern scholars, including Christians with no theological motivation for doing so, have adopted a collective interpretation, and in several adjoining passages in Isaiah, the servant is manifestly Israel. Of the thirteen appearances of a servant in the chapters preceding Isaiah 53, seven refer unequivocally to Israel (41:8–9; 44:1, 2, 21; 45:4; 49:3) and one (50:10) probably refers to the prophet. The remaining five are unclear, but they could all be read as referring to Israel. Thus, a substantial argument can be made that as a matter of straightforward interpretation, or *pešaṭ*, one should come to Isaiah 52–53 with the expectation that the servant is Israel.[11] The view that Rashi's straightforward exegetical instincts could have driven him to this identification of the servant is entirely plausible even without the evidence of an earlier tradition. With respect to the identification of the servant as Israel, there is nothing driving us to an explanation connected to the Crusade.

Let us now turn to our next question about Rashi. Would he have seen his interpretation as theologically problematic, or straightforward? With respect

---

9 Rembaum, "Development," 293, n. 11. Note especially Origen's reference to a Jew who proffered this identification, which has been noted by scholars since at least the mid-nineteenth century; see Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick, paperback ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1:55, p. 50.

10 Elliott Horowitz, "Isaiah's Suffering Servant and the Jews: From the Nineteenth Century to the Ninth," in *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations in Honor of David Berger*, ed. Elisheva Carlebach and Jacob J. Schacter (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012): 427–35. In Salmon's case, the identity of the servant is more complicated, since positive references refer to the Messiah and negative ones to the Messiah's ancestors; i.e., the Jews in exile. See Aldobaidi, *The Messiah in Isaiah 53*, 104–5 and 110, n. 43.

11 Orlinsky, in "The So-Called Suffering Servant," for all his vigorous rhetoric rejecting the collective understanding of the servant in Isaiah 53, cannot avoid affirming the position that the servant in chapter 52:13–15 is Israel, and he consequently severs those three verses from chapter 53 despite the marred appearance that both servants have in common.

to vicarious atonement, rabbinic texts contain enough assertions that the suffering or even death of the righteous atones for the sins of others that I do not believe that he would have been especially troubled by such a concept. What may well have troubled him is the notion that Israel's suffering provides atonement for the *nations*; this, as I shall argue, militates against the view that he introduced this concept in order to resolve the theological challenge posed by the Crusade.

My answers to these questions, then, point away from the historical/theological explanation and favor what might be seen as the more naïve view that Rashi was motivated by internal exegetical instincts and considerations. Moreover, I think that in this instance, we possess unusually persuasive evidence that the instincts of other medieval Jews as to the straightforward meaning of the key verses accorded with Rashi's understanding and that they did not see a genuinely attractive alternative from a linguistic and contextual perspective. If I can demonstrate this convincingly, then the judgment that Rashi *could* have been driven by the quest for *pešaṭ* will be thoroughly proven and the likelihood that he was will be greatly enhanced. Since the assessment of what is or is not *pešaṭ* – especially for an exegete of an era or culture other than our own – is almost always complicated by the subjective judgment of the observer, this is an ambitious assertion. If it should ultimately appear persuasive, or even worthy of consideration, then both the assertion itself and the approach that leads us there should be of considerable methodological interest.

The essence of my argument rests on the following point. In rare instances, a commentator will provide an interpretation that appears so manifestly forced and uncharacteristic that it virtually identifies itself as a contortion designed to avoid what the commentator considered the unacceptable though apparently more straightforward meaning. Thus, commentators who, unlike Rashi, really were implacably resistant to the position that Israel was vicariously suffering in order to atone for the sins of the nations needed to find a different explanation of the relevant verses in Isaiah 53. Had they been comfortable with the view that those verses simply mean that Israel suffers *from* the sinful behavior of the nations – or that the passage bears some other theologically kosher meaning – they would have provided the relevant interpretation without resorting to what I have described as manifest contortions. Thus, Abraham ibn Ezra, who sees the servant as Israel, says that "he was wounded for our transgressions" refers to "the sufferings inflicted on Israel by the nations," while "the chastisement of our peace was upon him" and "through his bruises we were healed" refer to the Jewish suffering that perpetuates peace for the Gentiles, since "all the time that Israel is in the humiliation of exile the nations will have peace." This is

hardly straightforward,[12] but given the intrinsic difficulty of Isaiah 53, it does not demonstrate that ibn Ezra was attracted to the vicarious atonement understanding of the verse on exegetical grounds but was doing everything possible to avoid it.[13]

Similarly, Isaac Abarvanel understood the key verses as referring to suffering inflicted on the Jews by the nations. He then cited ibn Ezra's understanding of "the chastisement of our peace was upon him" without criticism, but went on to suggest an alternative: the nations declare that the verbal chastisement directed at them by their preachers asserted that their peace depended on inflicting suffering on the servant and that with his bruises, they would be healed.[14] Though in my view this pushes the envelope of plausibility somewhat further, it does not reach the point of demonstrating that Abarvanel's first instinct regarding the *pešaṭ* of the verse was that it affirms vicarious atonement.

Some commentators, however, do engage in what strike me as manifest contortions, and when they do so, they tell us that they regard the unacceptable interpretation as the apparent *pešaṭ* and that they must avoid it at all costs. Let us look, then, at two commentators and one polemicist. Our first commentator is R. Isaiah of Trani as he confronts the verse *musar šelomenu ʿalaw u-ba-ḥavurato nirpaʾ lanu* (v. 5). As we have seen, this would normally mean something like "He bore the chastisement that made us whole (or, more literally, the chastisement of our peace [or wholeness] is upon him), and by his bruises we were healed." Instead, R. Isaiah interprets the first three words as follows: "Our *greeting* of peace (*šelomenu*) is removed (*musar*) from him (*ʿalaw* = *me-ʿalaw*)." As to "by his bruises we were healed," this means that "when we bruised him, we felt so happy that it was as if we were cured of our afflictions."[15] I doubt that anyone imagines that this is the first interpretation that ran through R. Isaiah's mind. What we are witnessing is the exercise of Herculean efforts to avoid what he would normally have seen as the straightforward meaning. Thus, Isaiah of Trani's fundamental instinct was to understand this verse as a reference to Israel's vicari-

12 It is difficult for us to classify war-torn medieval Christian Europe as an exemplar of peace, but the Jews, who perceived themselves as the downtrodden victims of their comfortable oppressors, saw matters differently.

13 Ibn Ezra's commentary, like that of R. David Kimhi below, is most easily consulted in standard rabbinic Bibles with commentaries.

14 Isaac Abarbanel, *Peruš ʿal Neviʾim Aḥaronim* (Jerusalem, 1956), 247.

15 Isaiah ben Mali de Trani, *Peruš Neviʾim u-Ketuvim le-Rabbenu Yešaʿyah ha-Rišon mi-Trani*, ed. Avraham Yosef Werthaimer (Jerusalem, 1959), 179–80.

ous atonement for the speakers, who are the nations of the world. However, this instinct just had to be wrong, and desperate measures were called for.

We will now turn to R. David Qimḥi (Radak), where I think that the argument is even stronger. Here, the approach to the text is very different, and in a way even antithetical, but if we apply the same approach that we did to R. Isaiah, Radak's contrasting exegetical strategy leads, perhaps ironically, to the same conclusion about the author's instinct regarding the straightforward meaning of the key verses. For Radak, verses 4 and 5 indeed express the belief that Israel has suffered vicariously as atonement for the sins of the nations. Unlike Rashi, however, he thoroughly and vehemently rejects this theology. One would expect that a commentator who regarded this conception as utterly erroneous and who felt comfortable with an alternative interpretation that expresses the truth would have provided that alternative understanding. Instead, Radak affirms that the verses assert a falsehood. Since the speakers are the nations of the world, they realize at the initial moment of redemption that Judaism has been the true faith all along , but they have not yet freed themselves from a core Christian error.[16] Thus, they speculate that Israel's suffering in exile must have resulted from vicarious atonement.

I suppose that one may regard this approach as so clever a thrust to the heart of Christian theology that Radak would have preferred it to a perfectly or relatively smooth reading that would have had the newly fully enlightened nations speak the truth. I find such a preference for verses that are false over verses that are true highly improbable. But there is more. Verses 11 and 12 echo key phrases in verses 4 and 5 ("It was our sickness that he was bearing" [*ḥolayeinu huʾ naśaʾ*] in v. 4 and "he bore the sin of the many" [*we-huʾ ḥeṭʾ rabbim naśaʾ*] in v. 12; "[It was] our pains that he suffered" [*u-makh'oveinu sevalam*] in v. 4 and "he will suffer their iniquities" [*wa-ʿawonotam huʾ yisbol*] in v. 11). With respect to verses 11 and 12, Radak's earlier strategy is precluded because the speaker is not the partially enlightened, partially deluded Gentile populace, but God himself. So here, Radak is forced to say that the parallel phrases in verses 11 and 12 refer not to classic Christian-style vicarious atonement, as the earlier phrases do; rather, "he will suffer their iniquities" means that Jewish righteousness in the face of suffering brings "peace and good to the world, even to Gentiles" (v. 11), and "he bore the sin of the many" (v.12) means that he bore and suffered the pain that the sin of the many, i.e., the sinful actions of the Gentiles, inflicted upon him.

16 This last formulation is my own, but I think that it underlies Radak's understanding. Even in the unlikely event that this is not the case, the argument is unaffected.

It is close to unimaginable – and I do not rule out the possibility that I am suffering from a deficient imagination – that Radak would have forced himself into such an improbable position unless he did not see a plausible way of interpreting *ḥolayeinu* ("our sickness") in verse 4 as "the sickness we inflicted," *makh'oveinu* ("our pains") in verse 4 as "the pains we inflicted," and especially *musar šelomenu ʿalaw* ("the chastisement of our peace [or wholeness] is upon him") and *ba-ḥavurato nirpaʾ lanu* ("by his bruises we were healed") in verse 5 as anything other than vicarious atonement.[17]

Now we turn to the polemicist. Moses ha-Kohen of Tordesillas, a fourteenth-century Spanish author, wrote a polemical work entitled *'Ezer ha-Emunah*, which, needless to say, addresses our passage.[18] In the introduction to his response to the Christian interpretation, he presents a framework that is marked by ambiguity regarding both the speakers and the servant. The passage, he tells us, "refers to what the nations will say at the time of the redemption about Israel in general and what the nations and the masses of Israel will say about the righteous in particular when they will see them in their dominion and power." Then, he turns to a verse-by-verse exegesis. Commenting on the opening phrase ("Behold my servant will succeed" [52:13]), he informs us that "the servant" refers to the righteous individuals of Israel. However, as we reach the very next verse, we learn that it alludes to the fact that "all the nations and peoples were astonished at the abasement of Israel [clearly meaning the entire Jewish collective], whose appearance and visage were different from those of the other nations during the exile, so that if someone wanted to degrade his fellow to an extreme degree, he would call him 'Jew.'" This understanding remains operative in the following final verse of chapter 52, which relates the ultimate triumph of Israel.

And so we arrive at chapter 53, where the speaker is no longer God, but a plural voice that Moses ha-Kohen, like most Jewish readers, takes to be the nations of the world, who express the low regard that they had for this despised figure. Here, Moses continues to understand that figure as the people of Israel in its entirety. Nothing else makes sense. Why should the nations see only some

---

17 It is a matter of considerable interest that in his commentary on Isaiah, the nineteenth-century exegete Samuel David Luzzatto interpreted v. 4 in a way that avoids vicarious atonement, but when he turned to v. 5, he felt impelled to embrace Radak's understanding that the nations are asserting a mistaken theological position.

18 Yehudah Shamir, *Rabbi Moses ha-Kohen of Tordesillas and His Book* 'Ezer ha-Emunah – *A Chapter in the History of the Judeo-Christian Controversy*, 2 vols. (dissertation) (Coconut Grove, FL: Field Research Projects, 1972), part I. 4 (edition of the Hebrew text). The relevant section of the discussion of our passage is on in 1: 73–75. This section of *'Ezer ha-Emunah* was published in Driver and Neubauer, *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah according to the Jewish Interpreters*, 1:110–12; translation in vol. 2: 116–18.

of Israel as marred, despised, shunned, and suffering? At this stage, we cannot avoid an undercurrent of puzzlement at the earlier references to the servant as the righteous of Israel. (This puzzlement applies, of course, to any commentator who sees the servant as the righteous subgroup of the Jewish people.) And then something even stranger happens, and its very strangeness provides the critical insight that explains what is really happening here.

When we reach verse 4, the one that begins "Yet it was our sickness that he was bearing," we are informed, without a scintilla of evidence in the text, that the speakers, who continue to address us in the first-person plural, have changed. They are no longer the nations, but the masses of Israel; that is, those who are not especially righteous. It is the righteous of Israel who suffer to atone for the sins of these speakers. As we confront this bizarre shift, we begin to understand what is motivating Moses. He is convinced that verses 4 and 5 are speaking of vicarious atonement. Unlike Radak, he has no problem with the theology of vicarious atonement itself, and unlike Rashi, he has an insurmountable problem with Israel's vicarious atonement for the sins of the nations. Consequently, he identifies the servant as the righteous of Israel from the outset even though his reading of the immediate continuation renders this restrictive identification so difficult that he temporarily abandons it. He then switches speakers from the nations to the Jewish masses, even though there is not a sliver of evidence for this. We come to understand that this is because he sees vicarious atonement as the unavoidable interpretation of 53:4–5, but is unwilling to have the Jewish people suffer in order to atone for the nations. Thus, the servant is not Israel as a whole, and the speaker ceases to be the nations. It is the righteous of Israel who vicariously atone for the sins of other Jews. I see no way to account for any of this unless Moses ha-Kohen was deeply convinced that the ineluctable meaning of the text pointed to vicarious atonement by a collective servant; however, he needed to shift that inclusive collective (Israel as a whole) to a more restricted one (the righteous of Israel) in the middle of the chapter so that the beneficiaries of this atonement could be Jews (the new speakers) rather than the nations (the previous speakers).

What I think all this means is that the vicarious atonement interpretation of Isaiah 53 demonstrably exercised a powerful, even compelling attraction for some medieval Jews other than Rashi on purely exegetical grounds. Thus, they either engaged in manifestly forced acrobatics in order to avoid it or they endorsed it despite the fact that it was contrary to their theological interests. There is every reason to assume that when Rashi proffered it, he was expressing precisely this attraction. It may be that his identification of the servant as Israel was driven by both textual and polemical considerations, but it is highly likely that his perception of the straightforward meaning, or *pešaṭ*, played a critical role.

Let me conclude with one more observation. The view that Rashi was motivated to explain the text in a way that deviated from precedent out of theological motives – that is, in order to account for the tragedy that befell the Jews of the Rhineland in 1096 – requires us to weigh the likely attractiveness in his eyes of a theology of Jewish suffering as atonement for the nations. To put the matter sharply, would Rashi really have constructed a conviction that Jews were murdered during the Crusade to atone for the sins of their murderers out of theological rather than exegetical motives? On a broader canvas, medieval Jews regularly wrestled with the problem of exile and suffering, providing a broad range of explanations.[19] Outside of commentaries on Isaiah 53, I have not found a single instance, either in Rashi or elsewhere, where the proposed explanation was that the Jewish people suffers in order to atone for the sins of its oppressors.[20] In formulating his interpretation of Isaiah 53, Rashi was not driven by a theological imperative; his understanding of a difficult passage drove him to set a theological obstacle aside and to propose an interpretation that may have made him at least somewhat uneasy.

My hope is that this presentation has implications that go beyond Isaiah 53 by illustrating a means of assessing what exegetes considered the *pešaṭ* of a passage by approaching the matter through the back door – not by meeting the notoriously difficult challenge of defining and applying their definition of *pešaṭ* directly, but by looking at manifestly anomalous exegesis that points to the interpretations that they were desperately trying to avoid.[21]

---

19 See my article "The Problem of Exile in Medieval Jewish-Christian Polemic," "*In the Dwelling of a Sage Lie Precious Treasures*" *Essays in Jewish Studies in Honor of Shnayer Z. Leiman,* eds. Yitzhak Berger and Chaim Milikowsky (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2020), 189–204.

20 The famous passage in Judah ha-Levi's *Kuzari* (2:44) with explicit reference to Isaiah 53 affirming that Israel is the heart of the nations and consequently suffers the pain that afflicts others is not a doctrine of vicarious atonement, nor is Ḥasdai Crescas's suggestion, also explicitly associated with Isaiah 53, that the exile of the Jews benefits the other nations "insofar as they will derive benefit on account of the merit of this nation, as it is said, 'the whole world is sustained for the sake of my son Ḥaninah, and my son Ḥaninah has to subsist on a *kav* of carrots from one weekend to the next' (*b. Ber.* 17b)." See Ḥasdai Crescas, *Light of the Lord [Or Hashem],* trans. Roslyn Weiss (Oxford: Oxford University Press), book 3, division A, part 8, 317–18.

21 This essay is dedicated to a friend and colleague whose exceptional productivity, first-class scholarship, and remarkable range evoke both admiration and humility.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Abarbanel, Isaac. *Peruš ʿal Neviʾim Aḥaronim*. Jerusalem: Torah va-Daʿat, 1956.
Alobaidi, Joseph, ed. and trans. *The Messiah in Isaiah 53: The Commentaries of Saʿadyah Gaon, Salmon ben Yeruḥam, and Yefet ben ʿEli on Is 52:13–53:12, Edition and Translation*. Bern: Peter Lang, 1998.
Crescas, Ḥasdai. *Light of the Lord (Or Hashem)*. Translated by Roslyn Weiss. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
Driver, Samuel R., and Adolf Neubauer, trans. *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah according to the Jewish Interpreters. II: Translations*. Oxford, 1877.
Isaiah ben Mali di Trani. *Peruš Neviʾim u-Ketuvim le-Rabbenu Yešaʿyah ha-Rišon mi-Trani*. Edited by Avraham Yosef Werthaimer. Jerusalem: Ketav ve-Sefer, 1959.
Martini, Raymond. *Pugio fidei Raymundi Martini ordinis praedicatorum adversus Mauros et Judaeos*. Paris, 1651.
Neubauer, Adolf, ed. *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah according to the Jewish Interpreters. I: Texts*. Oxford, 1876.
Origen. *Contra Celsum*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Paperback ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
Seder ha-Seliḥot ke-Minhag Liṭaʾ. Edited by Daniel Goldschmidt. Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1965.

Secondary Sources

Baer, Yitzḥak. “Rashi we-ha-Meṣiʾut ha-Hisṭorit šel Zemanno.” In *Sefer Rashi*, edited by Y.L. ha-Cohen Maimon. Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1956.
Berger, David. “The Problem of Exile in Medieval Jewish-Christian Polemic.” “*In the Dwelling of a Sage Lie Precious Treasures*”*: Essays in Jewish Studies in Honor of Shnayer Z. Leiman*, edited by Yitzhak Berger and Chaim Milikowsky, 189–204. New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2020
Grossman, Avraham. “The Commentary of Rashi on Isaiah and the Jewish-Christian Debate.” In *Studies in Medieval Jewish Intellectual and Social History: Festschrift in Honor of Robert Chazan*, edited by David Engel, Lawrence H. Schiffman, and Elliot R. Wolfson, 47–62. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012.
Himmelfarb, Martha. *Jewish Messiahs in the Christian Empire: A History of the Book of Zerubbabel*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.
Horowitz, Elliott. “Isaiah’s Suffering Servant and the Jews: From the Nineteenth Century to the Ninth.” In *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations*, edited by Elisheva Carlebach and Jacob J. Schacter, 419–36. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012.
Orlinsky, Harry M. “The So-Called Suffering Servant In Isaiah 53.” In *Interpreting the Prophetic Tradition: The Goldenson Lectures, 1955–1966*, edited by Harry M. Orlinsky, 225–74. New York: Ktav, 1969.

Rembaum, Joel E. “The Development of a Jewish Exegetical Tradition regarding Isaiah 53.” *Harvard Theological Review* 75 (1982): 289–311.

Rosenthal, Judah. “Ha-Pulmus ha-Anti-Noṣri be-Rashi ʿal ha-Tanakh.” 1: 101–116. In Judah Rosenthal, *Meḥqarim u-Meqorot*. 2 vols. Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 1967.

Shamir, Yehudah. *Rabbi Moses ha-Kohen of Tordesillas and His Book* ‘Ezer ha-Emunah – *A Chapter in the History of the Judeo-Christian Controversy*. 2 vols. Coconut Grove, FL: Field Research Projects, 1972.

Sicherman, Harvey, and Gilad J. Gevaryahu. “Rashi and the First Crusade: Commentary, Liturgy, Legend.” *Judaism* 48 (1999): 181–97.

Polemical and Exegetical Polarities in Medieval Jewish Cultures

Studies in Honour of Daniel J. Lasker

Edited by
Ehud Krinis, Nabih Bashir, Sara Offenberg, and
Shalom Sadik

DE GRUYTER