

*The Suffering Christ as a
Midrash on Daniel*

THE SUFFERING JESUS ON HIS CROSS may be in some ways the central, defining image of Christianity, and even Christendom for most of us. Christians wear the cross, and they cross themselves. For centuries, artists have depicted the scene of the suffering Messiah myriad times; in modernity, even Jewish artists such as Chagall have represented this iconic Christian emblem. Over and over again, we find the commonplace (and commonsense) statement that what divides Christians and Jews most sharply is the idea that the divine Messiah could suffer and die; indeed, many hold that it was this belief (produced, supposedly, after the fact) that was the most tangible marker of an absolute break between Jews and their new rivals, the Christians. In his now near-classic statement of the absolute difference of Jewish from Christian ideas of the Messiah, *The*

Messianic Idea in Israel, Joseph Klausner, the important Jewish historian of the Second Temple, makes the following argument, or rather, offers the absolutely dominant and prevailing view of this matter: that initially the only difference between “Christians” and “Jews” was that the former believed that the Messiah had already come while the latter believed that he was yet to come:¹

But because of the fact that the Messiah who had already come was crucified as an ordinary rebel after being scourged and humiliated, and thus was not successful in the political sense, having failed to redeem his people Israel; because of the lowly political status of the Jews at the end of the period of the Second Temple and after the Destruction; and because of the fear that the Romans would persecute believers in a political Messiah, for these reasons there perforce came about a development of ideas, which after centuries of controversy became crystallized in Christianity.²

According to Klausner’s generally held view, the idea of messianic suffering, death, and resurrection came about only as an apology after the fact of Jesus’ death. In this view, it is simply a scandal for Christian messianic thought that Jesus was scourged and humiliated as a common rebel, despite the fact that he was the Messiah. In that case, “then why did God allow His Chosen One, the Messiah,

to undergo frightful suffering and even to be crucified the most shameful death of all, according to Cicero 24 and Tacitus 2B and not save him from all these things? The answer can only be that it was the will of God and the will of the Messiah himself that he should be scourged, humiliated, and crucified. But whence came a purpose like this, that would bring about suffering and death without sin?"³ The answer to the question of Jesus' suffering and death, according to Klausner (and nearly everyone else), is that the suffering of the Messiah was vicarious and the death an atoning death—in other words, the common Christian theology of the cross. After the Messiah Jesus' humiliation, suffering, and death, according to this view—held by many Christian thinkers and scholars as well as Jewish ones—the theology of Jesus' redemptive, vicarious suffering was discovered, as it were, in Isaiah 53, which was allegedly reinterpreted as referring not to the persecuted People of Israel, but to the suffering Messiah:

¹⁰Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.

¹¹Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. ¹²Therefore I will allot

him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

If these verses do indeed refer to the Messiah, they clearly predict his suffering and death to atone for the sins of humans, but the Jews allegedly always interpreted these verses as referring to the suffering of Israel herself and not the Messiah, who would only triumph. To sum up this generally held view: The theology of the suffering of the Messiah was an after-the-fact apologetic response to explain the suffering and ignominy Jesus suffered, since he was deemed by “Christians” to be the Messiah. Christianity, on this view, was initiated by the fact of the crucifixion, which is seen as setting into motion the new religion. Moreover, many who hold this view hold also that Isaiah 53 was distorted by the Christians from its allegedly original meaning, in which it referred to the suffering of the People of Israel, to explain and account for the shocking fact that the Messiah had been crucified.

This commonplace view has to be rejected completely. The notion of the humiliated and suffering Messiah was not at all alien within Judaism before Jesus’ advent, and it remained current among Jews well into the future following that—indeed, well into the early modern period.⁴ The

fascinating (and to some, no doubt, uncomfortable) fact is that this tradition was well documented by modern Messianic Jews, who are concerned to demonstrate that their belief in Jesus does not make them un-Jewish. Whether or not one accepts their theology, it remains the case that they have a very strong textual base for the view that the suffering Messiah is based in deeply rooted Jewish texts early and late. Jews, it seems, had no difficulty whatever with understanding a Messiah who would vicariously suffer to redeem the world. Once again, what has been allegedly ascribed to Jesus after the fact is, in fact, a piece of entrenched messianic speculation and expectation that was current before Jesus came into the world at all. That the Messiah would suffer and be humiliated was something Jews learned from close reading of the biblical texts, a close reading in precisely the style of classically rabbinic interpretation that has become known as midrash, the concordance of verses and passages from different places in Scripture to derive new narratives, images, and theological ideas.

Throughout this book, we have been observing how ideas that have been thought to be the most distinctive innovations of Jesus himself or his followers can be found in the religious literature of the Jews of the time of Jesus or before. This observation takes nothing away from the dignity or majesty of the Christian story, nor is it meant to. Rather than seeing Christianity as a new invention, seeing

it as one of the paths that Judaism took—a path as ancient in its sources as the one that rabbinic Jews trod—has a majesty of its own. Many Jews were expecting the divine-human Messiah, the Son of Man. Many accepted Jesus as that figure, while others did not. Although there is precious little pre-Christian evidence among Jews for the suffering of the Messiah, there are good reasons to consider this too no stumbling block for the “Jewishness” of the ideas about the Messiah, Jesus as well. Let me make clear I am not claiming that Jesus and his followers contributed nothing new to the story of a suffering and dying Messiah; I am not, of course, denying them their own religious creativity. I am claiming that even this innovation, if indeed they innovated, was entirely within the spirit and hermeneutical method of ancient Judaism, and not a scandalous departure from it.

This point of the “Jewishness” of the vicarious sufferings of the Messiah can be established in two ways: first by showing how the Gospels use perfectly traditional, mid-rashic ways of reasoning to develop these ideas and apply them to Jesus, and second, by demonstrating how common the idea of a suffering and dying Messiah was among perfectly “orthodox” rabbinic Jews from the time of the Talmud and onward. My reasoning is that if this were such a shocking thought, how is it that the rabbis of the Talmud and midrash, only a couple of centuries later, had no difficulty whatever with portraying the Messiah’s vicarious

suffering or discovering him in Isaiah 53, just as the followers of Jesus had done?²⁵ But I get ahead of myself: first, let us see how close biblical reading in the style of midrash can best explain the passages in Mark that speak of the shaming and death of Jesus.

Shaming the Son of Man: Mark 8:38

The first time in Mark that Jesus reveals the inevitability of his suffering and death is in chapter 8. As we have seen, the sometimes puzzling and shocking statements made by Jesus about his authority can be derived from close reading of the Daniel passages about the Son of Man. These Jews pored over the Scripture and interpreted every detail in order to understand what the Messiah would look like and what to expect when he came. Here we have a further example that illuminates our question about the suffering of the Messiah:

²⁷And Jesus went with his disciples, to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" ²⁸And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others one of the prophets." ²⁹And he asked them, "But who do you say I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." ³⁰And he charged them to tell no one about him. ³¹And he began to teach

them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³²And he said this plainly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. ³³But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter, and said, "Get thee behind me Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men." ³⁴And he called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? ³⁷For what can a man give in return for his life? ³⁸*For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*

In this passage, as in the immediately following Mark 9:12, we are told by Jesus that the Son of Man must "suffer many things." In the sequence of vv. 29–31 it is made absolutely clear that the Christ will suffer and that Jesus believes that he is the Christ. The equation of the Son of Man and his suffering with the Christ is made absolutely clear in these verses as well. This all makes the most sense if we assume that Jesus is alluding to the Son of Man figure

from Daniel and his fate, which is to be crushed for a time, two times, and half a time before rising triumphant.

Jesus had a very clear sense of his messianic role and fate, and that this role and fate were what had been predicted for the Son of Man in Daniel 7. Jesus first is identified as Messiah by others and then refers to himself as the Son of Man, thus establishing the identity of the Messiah and his ultimate fate as that of the Danielic Son of Man. Jesus is also clearly claiming that identity for himself.

In Mark 14:62, we find a similar, and if anything even more explicit, self-identification by Jesus as Messiah and Son of Man. It would be no exaggeration to say that these two explicit moments in which this equation is made provide a key to reading all of the Son of Man passages in the Gospel as indicating Jesus' sense of his divine vocation and role:

“Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed One?”
And Jesus said “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of Heaven.” Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy!”

We learn several key things from this passage.⁶ The first, as we saw above, is that “Messiah” is for Jesus equivalent to the “Son of Man.” Second, we learn that claiming

to be the Son of Man was considered blasphemy by the high priest and thus a claim not only to messianic status but also to divinity. When Jesus answers “I am,” he is going even further than merely claiming messianic status, for “I Am,” *eigo eimi*, is precisely what YHVH calls himself when Moses asks his name: “This is what you are to say to the Israelites, ‘I am [*eigo eimi*] has sent me to you’ ” (Exodus 3:14). The high priest of the Jews could hardly be expected to miss this allusion. Jesus claims to be the Son of God, the Son of Man, and indeed God himself. A statement such as that is not merely true or false; it is truth or blasphemy.* It is also the same blasphemy of which Jesus

* According to the Mishna, Sanhedrin 7:5, it is mentioning the name of God that constitutes blasphemy. Both Josephus and the Community Rule of Qumran precede the Mishna in this determination. I contend, therefore, that it is most plausible to understand Jesus’ “I Am” as being the name of God, hence the blasphemy. Many scholars deny this argument, contending that “I Am” is merely a declarative sentence and not a predication of the name of God to himself (see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Mark: A Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007], 704–6). The blasphemy, then, has to be understood differently, namely, in connection with Philo’s definition of blasphemy, which is, as she says, somewhat less stringent than that of the Mishna, Josephus, or Qumran (see Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Charge of Blasphemy in Mark 14:64,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26, 4 [2004]: 379–401). In my view, an interpretation of the text that is closest to the other Palestinian views of the matter is preferable, but Yarbro Collins may, of course, be right. In support of her view is the verse in Mark 2 discussed above where Jesus is accused of blasphemy for having arrogated to himself the divine prerogative to forgive sins. However, even on Philo’s account, blasphemy

was accused in chapter 2, when he presumed the divine prerogative of forgiving sins. Third, we learn that for the Jesus of the Gospels, the title “Son of Man” derives from Daniel 7, is the name for the divine redeemer of a high Christology, and thus constitutes the blasphemy of which the high priest speaks.

The high priest clearly knows the terms “Christ,” “Son of God,” and “Son of Man.” He also perceives that when Jesus says “I am,” he is declaring himself the one whose name is “I am,” YHWH himself. Through all of these terms, Jesus is claiming some share of divinity, hence the charge of blasphemy.⁷ Here it cannot be denied, of course, that

consists of imputing divine status to oneself or to another human, so my point that the blasphemy consists precisely in Jesus claiming divine status for himself stands. Even if *eigo eimi* is innocent, Jesus’ further allusion to himself as the Son of Man and coming with the clouds of heaven certainly, according to the high priest’s reaction, constitutes blasphemy and thus a claim to divine status. Compare also John 8:57–58: “Then the Jews said to him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham?’ He said to them, ‘Truly, truly I say until you, before Abraham came into being, I Am [*eigo eimi*].’ They then picked up stones that they might cast them at him.” This is precisely the same as what happens here in Mark. Jesus in both Gospels is understood as claiming divine status through naming himself as YHWH names himself. Since stoning is the biblically ordained punishment for blasphemy, the people seek to stone him. This is precisely the same blasphemy for which Stephen was stoned according to Acts 7:56, although there the blasphemy consisted in implying the divine status of Jesus, not, of course, his own. To my knowledge, this is the only place in which “Son of Man” is used of Jesus by someone other than Jesus himself; it shows how charged was the claim to be the Son of Man, which only makes sense if it is a claim to divinity.

there is a direct allusion to the Danielic source of the narrative of the Son of Man, which is explicitly signaled by the words “coming with the clouds of heavens”; thus I suggest the parallel provides good evidence for my interpretation of the Mark 8 passage as well. As in 14:62, he refers to the exaltation of the Son of Man; in 8:31 he refers to the suffering and humiliation of the Son of Man, which is then cited again in 9:12, “as it has been written.” The two verses thus complete each other.

The progression of the Gospel narrative runs in the following fashion:

- Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is.
- Peter answers that he is the Messiah.
- Jesus answers that the Son of Man must suffer many things.
- Peter denies this (he is ashamed of a suffering Messiah).
- Jesus rebukes him.
- Jesus calls the disciples together to provide them with the lesson to be learned from his sharp rebuke of Peter.
- All who would be followers of Jesus must pick up crosses and be willing to lose their lives as he will.
- But if any are ashamed of Jesus in his humiliation and crucifixion, the exalted Son of Man (Jesus vindicated) will be ashamed of them in

the final moment, when he comes in glory with his angels (Daniel 7).⁸

It is precisely under the title Son of Man that Jesus predicates his sufferings. At the end of chapter 7 of Daniel, the symbol of the Son of Man is interpreted as “the People of the Saints of the Most High,” who will be crushed for a certain amount of time under the heels of the fourth beast and then will arise and, defeating the beast, “will receive the kingdom and hold the kingdom forever and ever.”⁹ It surely can hardly be doubted that the phrase “the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected” is a palpable allusion to Isaiah 53:3, in which we are told that the suffering servant of the Lord “is despised and rejected of men.” This, as we have seen, is very plausibly read about the Messiah. We must also, of course, be mindful of other biblical texts in the background here, including especially the psalms of lament. We therefore don’t need to posit a special Christian mode of reading that led to this idea. Once again, the primary mode of early Jewish biblical exegesis is midrash, which is the concatenation of related (or even seemingly unrelated) passages and verses from all over the Bible to derive new lessons and narratives. It is midrash that we see at work here too.

The association of these prophetic texts with the Son of Man from Daniel is precisely what enabled the full development of a suffering Christology, according to which

Jesus' demise (and exaltation) was interpreted. In other words, it is as plausible to assume that Jews held this view of the vicarious suffering of the Messiah and his atoning death, as predicted by the Prophet Isaiah before Jesus' own suffering and death, as it is to assume that Christians made it up after the fact. Once again, we find a Jesus who sees himself, imagines himself, and presents himself as entirely fulfilling the messianic expectation already in place to the effect that the "Son of Man must suffer many things."

The Jews were expecting a Redeemer in the time of Jesus. Their own sufferings under Roman domination seemed so great, and this Redeemer had been predicted for them. Reading the Book of Daniel closely, at least some Jews—those behind the first-century Similitudes of Enoch and those with Jesus—had concluded that the Redeemer would be a divine figure named the Son of Man who would come to earth as a human, save the Jews from oppression, and rule the world as its sovereign. Jesus seemed to many to fit that bill. His life and death were claimed to be precisely a fulfillment of what had been predicted of the Messiah, Son of Man, by the old books and traditions. What happened as that expectation of redemption was delayed and as more Gentiles joined this community is the story of the Church, of Christianity. It is not the suffering and dying of the Messiah that precipitated

that story at all, as we see once we read the Gospel in its close connection to Daniel.

The connection with Daniel may be even clearer when we look at the parallel version of this teaching of Jesus to the disciples in 9:31:

³⁰They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he would not have any one know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise." ³²But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to ask him.

That this enmity will arise against the Messiah can also clearly be derived by midrashic reading of the end of Daniel 7 as well:

²⁵And he will speak words against the Most High, and he will oppress the high holy ones, and he will think to change the times and the law, and they will be delivered into his hand until a time, two times, and half a time. ²⁶But the judgment shall sit, and they shall take away his dominion, to consume and to destroy it unto the end. ²⁷And the kingdom and the dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people

of the saints of the Most High: his kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him.

Those Jews who read the Son of Man in accord with the end of the chapter as representing the People of Israel had to do some harmonizing work to explain away the clearly divine implications of the vision in the first part, but those Jews, in turn, who gloried in the divinity of the Son of Man also had some hard harmonizing work to do to explain the end of the chapter in accordance with their reading of the first part, understanding the “People of the Most High” as that divine Messiah. It is the Christ, Jesus, who is accordingly handed over to the wicked one for a prescribed interval, here said to be “a time, two times, and half a time.” This narrative of the Messiah was not a revolutionary departure within the religious history of the communities of readers of the Bible but an obvious and plausible consequence of a well-established tradition of reading Daniel 7 as being about a divine-human Messiah.¹⁰ Jesus’ resurrection “after three days,” according to the Markan version, as opposed to the “in three days” of the later evangelists, could possibly derive as well from a close reading of the Daniel passage, for if Jesus’ suffering before exaltation comes from the “time, two times, and half a time” during which the one like a Son of Man is to suffer in Daniel 7, and if these “times” are understood

as days, then Jesus would rise after a day, two more days, and part of a day, that is, after the third day. But this must remain a speculation.

“As It Is Written Concerning Him”: Mark 9:11–13

Jesus’ story and his progressive self-revelation to his disciples return again and again to Scripture—and to midrash on that Scripture. Mark 9:11–13 is the account of Jesus’ conversation with his disciples after the transfiguration on the mountain. It thus represents a highly emphasized climactic moment in the story of the Gospel and one that is particularly telling for Christology. This passage has puzzled most commentators till now, but we will see that the text is best understood as part and parcel of a Jewish tradition of the suffering Messiah. Here are the verses in their necessary and immediate context, following the transfiguration in which Moses, Elijah, and Jesus have been revealed to be close associates (at the very least) in a vision:

⁹As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

¹⁰So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean. ¹¹And they asked him saying, Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first? ¹²And he said to them, Elijah

when he comes first restores all things. And how has it been written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be rejected?¹¹ ¹³But I say to you that Elijah has come and they did to him whatever they wanted, as has been written concerning him.

As many commentators have written, this passage raises great difficulties. There is no record in the Scriptures that Elijah would be mistreated, so on what basis does the Gospel read that “it has been written concerning him”?¹² Further, as Joel Marcus has pointed out, “if Elijah restores all things, then how once conceive of a Messiah who is to be rejected by humanity, a Messiah whose suffering and rejection are foretold in the scripture (9:12c)? The two expectations appear to contradict each other.”¹³ Marcus’s brilliant move here is to realize that this is not a flaw in the Gospel text but its very vocation.¹⁴ This contradiction is what the Gospel text is about; this is not a “bug,” as we might say, but a feature. We have something very close to a standard midrashic form here: the question of the disciples is not “How is it written that Elijah will come first?” but “Why do the scribes say this, for if what they say is true: How is it written that the Son of Man will suffer many things?” They are pointing to a contradiction between the verse to which Jesus refers and the statements of the scribes, not between two verses.¹⁵

The disciples understand Jesus of vv. 9–11 very well. They understand that what has been revealed to them is that Jesus is the Son of Man, and they know what that means. They are astounded, as they always are, that Jesus will suffer, even though, as Jesus points out, it is, indeed, written that the Son of Man will suffer. After all, at the end of the chapter in 9:30, they still have not understood Jesus' prediction that he will be handed over to human beings, that they will kill him, and that he will rise. They are also puzzled that Jesus as the Messiah has come but Elijah seemingly hasn't, and the scribes say that Elijah will come before the Messiah and restore all things.

Jesus' answer is brilliantly to the point:

¹¹And they asked him saying, Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first? ¹²And he said to them, Elijah when he comes first restores all things. And how has it been written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be rejected? ¹³But I say to you that Elijah has come and they did to him whatever they wanted, as has been written concerning him.

The *Scribes* say that Elijah, coming before the Son of Man, will restore all things and thus how could it be that the Son of Man will suffer? And Jesus answers: Does the

Prophet, in fact, say that Elijah will restore all things; if that were the case, how, indeed, could it be written that the Son of Man will suffer many things? No, Jesus maintains (correctly), it does not say in the verse that Elijah will restore all things; it is the Scribes who came up with this idea themselves. And the Scribes must simply be wrong in their interpretation of the coming of Elijah; all will be restored, not by Elijah but by the Son of Man and only after the terrible sufferings of the Day of the Lord, which are themselves written clearly in the text of Malakhi. Now the answer is clear: Elijah has come already in the form of John the Baptist (as explicitly in Matthew), the forerunner, and they did to him what they wished to.¹⁶ His suffering becomes a type of the suffering that the Son of Man also will undergo, and the disciples are answered in both of their questions. Jesus is shown here, as also in the halakhic discussions that we have encountered previously, besting the Scribes and the Pharisees at their own game of midrash. The idea of the suffering of the Son of Man is anything but an alien import into Judaism; in fact, it is its very vocation.

It is here perhaps more than anywhere else in the Gospel of Mark that we see its background in the Jewish mode of biblical interpretation, midrash. Once again, to remind readers, midrash is a way of multiply contextualizing verses with other verses and passages in the Bible,

in order to determine their meaning. Our passage here is quite close in form to a type of tannaitic midrash in which a verse is cited, a commentary is offered, another contradictory verse is cited, and the first comment is either revised or rejected.¹⁷ This argument would strongly support the claim that the Gospels, or at least this Gospel, are working in something very close to a midrashic mode for the generation of their narrative, especially for the present purposes in anything having to do with the Son of Man. Once again, we see here evidence that the idea of a suffering Messiah would not have been at all foreign to Jewish sensibilities, which derived their very messianic hopes and expectations from such methods of close reading of Scripture, just as Jesus did. This identification between the Son of Man and the fate of Jesus comes to its culmination in the verses from chapter 14 (discussed above) in which Jesus is asked about his messianic identity by the high priests just before the crucifixion and confesses openly (for the first time) that he is the Son of God, the Messiah, the Son of Man who will come on the clouds of heaven.

*Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" as Messiah
in Jewish Traditions*

The suffering Messiah who atones for our sins was a familiar idea throughout the history of the Jewish religion, even long after there truly was a separation from Christianity. The idea of a suffering Messiah is present in ancient, medieval, and early modern Judaism. This fact, at the very least, calls into question the truism that the formation and acceptance of this idea by followers of Jesus constituted the necessary and absolute breaking point with the religion of Israel. The Suffering Messiah is part and parcel of Jewish tradition from antiquity to modernity. Not only, then, is the Gospel drawing on Jewish tradition but this idea remained a Jewish one long after Christianity had indeed been separated off in late antiquity.

One of many important pieces of evidence for this view is this history of how Jewish commentators have interpreted Isaiah 53:

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? ²For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. ³He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and

acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

⁴Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. ⁵But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. ⁶All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. ⁹They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

¹⁰Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. ¹¹Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and

he shall bear their iniquities. ¹²Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

I cannot overstate the extent to which the interpretation of this passage has anchored the conventional view of Judaism's relationship to Messianism. It has been generally assumed by modern folks that Jews have always given the passage a metaphorical reading, understanding the suffering servant to refer to the People of Israel, and that it was the Christians who changed and distorted its meaning to make it refer to Jesus. Quite to the contrary, we now know that many Jewish authorities, maybe even most, until nearly the modern period have read Isaiah 53 as being about the Messiah; until the last few centuries, the allegorical reading was a minority position.

Aside from one very important—but absolutely unique—notice in Origen's *Contra Celsum*, there is no evidence at all that any late ancient Jews read Isaiah 52–53 as referring to anyone but the Messiah.¹⁸ There are, on the other hand, several attestations of ancient rabbinic readings of the song as concerning the Messiah and his tribulations.

The Palestinian Talmud, commenting on the biblical

passage “And the land shall mourn” (Zechariah 12:12), cites two amoraic opinions: one amora who interprets “This is the mourning over the Messiah” and one who disagrees, arguing that it is the mourning over the sexual desire (that has been killed in the messianic age) (PT Sukkah 5:2 55b).¹⁹ There are, moreover, traditions in the Babylonian Talmud and thus attested from the fourth to the sixth centuries A.D. (but very likely earlier), the most famous and explicit of which is Sanhedrin 98b. Referring to the Messiah, the Talmud asks there openly, “What is his name?” and various names are proffered by different rabbis. After several different views, we find: “And the Rabbis say, ‘the leper’ of the House of Rabbi is his name, for it says, ‘Behold he has borne our disease,²⁰ and suffered our pains, and we thought him smitten, beaten by God and tortured’ [Isa. 53:4].” We see here both the vicarious suffering of the Messiah and the use of Isaiah 53 to anchor the idea. This midrash (or one very like it) is what lies behind the heartrending image that appears only one page earlier in the Talmud of the Messiah sitting at the gates of Rome among the poor and those who suffer from painful disease. They all loosen and bind their bandages at one time, and he loosens and binds them one at a time, saying: “Perhaps I will be needed and I don’t want to delay.” Thus the Messiah too, ever mindful of his soteriological mission, suffers from the same disease and painful tortures of the indigent and sick of Rome.

Another classical rabbinic passage might perhaps be the earliest attestation from the tradition:²¹

Rabbi Yose Hagelili said: Go forth and learn the praise of the King Messiah and the reward of the righteous from the First Adam. For he was only commanded one thou-shalt-not commandment and he violated it. Behold how many deaths he and his descendants and the descendants of his descendants were fined until the end of all of the generations. Now which of God's qualities is greater than the other, the quality of mercy or the quality of retribution? Proclaim that the quality of goodness is the greater and the quality of retribution the lesser! And the King Messiah fasts and suffers for the sinners, as it says, "and he is made sick for our sins etc." ever more so and more will he be triumphant for all of the generations, as it says, "And the Lord visited upon him the sin of all."²²

If this text be deemed genuine, then we have clear evidence that by the third century, rabbinic readers understood the suffering servant to be the Messiah who suffers to vicariously atone for the sins of humans.

There are also various medieval Jewish commentators, among them figures marginal to rabbinic Judaism (but hardly suspected of Christian leanings) such as the

Karaite Yefet ben Ali, who clearly understand the Isaiah text and its suffering servant as about the Messiah.²³ The early modern Kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Alshekh, also a spotlessly “orthodox” rabbinite teacher, writes, “I may remark, then, that our Rabbis with one voice accept and affirm the opinion that the prophet is speaking of the King Messiah, and we ourselves also adhere to the same view.”²⁴ The intellectual giant of Spanish Jewry, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, concedes that according to the midrash and the rabbis of the Talmud, Isaiah 53 is entirely about the Messiah, but he dissents.²⁵

As we see, neither Judaism nor Jews have ever spoken with one voice on this (hermeneutical) theological question, and therefore there is no sense in which the assertion of many sufferings and rejection and contempt for the Son of Man constitutes a break with Judaism or the religion of Israel. Indeed, in the Gospels these ideas have been derived from the Torah (Scripture in its broadest meaning) by that most Jewish of exegetical styles, the way of midrash.²⁶ There is no essentially Christian (drawn from the cross) versus Jewish (triumphalist) notion of the Messiah, but only one complex and contested messianic idea, shared by Mark and Jesus with the full community of the Jews. The description of the Christ as predicting his own suffering and then that very suffering in the Passion narrative, the Passion of the Christ, does not in any way then

contradict the assertion of Martin Hengel that “Christianity grew *entirely* out of Jewish soil.”²⁷

Gospel Judaism was straightforwardly and completely a Jewish-messianic movement, and the Gospel the story of the Jewish Christ.