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Isaiah 53:3, ESV.

*³He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

Servant Songs: Scriptural Appropriation?

There are four passages in the Book of Isaiah that Christians call the “Servant Songs”. To Christians, they are said to prophesize the birth, life, and death of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. One of these passages, the fourth one, comes from Isaiah 53. The widespread interpretation of these ancient Hebrew scriptures by Christians has caused some conflict between Jews and Christians, to the point of Isaiah 53 often not being read during Jewish synagogue services. Are Christians being arrogant, appropriating Jewish scripture and reinterpreting it for their own purposes? We’ll look at the four Servant Songs of Isaiah.

First, though, I want to talk about one of my grammar school teachers. We’ll call her Sister Marie. Something called the Second Vatican Council had recently occurred when I was a young boy. Sister Marie only talked about it very briefly in class, and after school I asked her what it was all about. She said that it was very

complex, but that she would be happy to tell me what she thought was one of the most important aspects of the Council. I sat down. She pulled up another kid's desk and sat down facing me. This is my best shot at remembering what she told me. She said that for many centuries Christians had blamed Jews for killing Jesus because the Bible says that Pontius Pilot, the Roman Governor, declared that Jesus was innocent, but that the Jews wanted him crucified. Indeed, this is what we read in the Gospel of John, where the Jews prefer a thief over a Savior:

Pilate went back outside to the Jews and told them, “I find no guilt in him. ³⁹ But you have a custom that I should release one man for you at the Passover. So do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?” ⁴⁰ They cried out again, “Not this man, but Barabbas!” Now Barabbas was a robber.

Sister Marie said that just because some corrupt Jewish leaders who were afraid of losing their power wanted Jesus dead was no reason to treat all Jews like they are bad, especially not two thousand years later. She said that we were moving into an era of reconciliation – I remember that word, reconciliation - where Christians would truly follow Jesus' command to love your neighbor, including all Jews. So, perhaps I was in that first generation of Catholic kids to be taught the truth of why the Bible says the Jews killed Jesus and the way Jesus taught us to treat all people. Sister Marie had something else to say to me, and I will get back to this.

The first Servant Song is in Isaiah 42. Here are the first three verses:

42 Behold my servant, whom I uphold,
 my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my Spirit upon him;
 he will bring forth justice to the nations.

2 He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
 or make it heard in the street;

3 a bruised reed he will not break,
 and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

These are the words of Isaiah. Christians say that this speaks of Jesus being gentle but strong, and how he will bring about an age of justice. He will not be a military leader, as first century rabbis taught the Messiah would be. He wouldn't be there to destroy the Roman Empire. Notice that he will bring justice to "the nations", plural. Early Christians interpreted this as including non-Jews, Gentiles. Some English translations even say, "to the Gentiles" and not "to the nations".

The second Servant Song, and we call them songs because they are written as poetry that was often sung, is in Chapter 49. It is a long song, and so I have heavily abridged this. It starts with verse 1; I am skipping to verse 5:

5 And now the *LORD* says,
 he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
for I am honored in the eyes of the *LORD*,
 and my God has become my strength—

6 he says:
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
 to raise up the tribes of Jacob
 and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,

that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

7 Thus says the LORD:

*“Kings shall see and arise;
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves.
I will keep you and give you
as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land.”*

10 they shall not hunger or thirst,

*neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them,
for he who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.”*

13 Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;

*break forth, O mountains, into singing!
For the LORD has comforted his people
and will have compassion on his afflicted.*

We see from this that Jesus will be born as a human, and he will be honored in the eyes of God. He shall raise up lost people and be a light for all nations, reaching the end of the Earth. Kings and princes will be below him. Very importantly, he will bring a “covenant to the people”. Because he will lead us, no one will suffer. Everyone will rejoice. This is, at least, the Christian interpretation.

But notice these words:

*“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;*

The Jewish interpretation of these Songs is that they are not about a Messiah, that the “servant” - and this word appears twenty times in this song alone - refers

to Israel as a whole. The belief is that this is about the physical restoration of Israel itself, and indeed, the “suffering servant” is Israel, which has indeed suffered for many hundreds of years. The idea of the servant being a Messiah might have been first proposed by the first followers of Jesus, Jews who saw Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.

The third Servant Song is in 50:4-11. Again, this is highly abridged:

*⁴ The Lord God has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.
Morning by morning he awakens;
he awakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught.*

*¹⁰ Who among you fears the LORD
and obeys the voice of his servant?
Let him who walks in darkness
and has no light
trust in the name of the LORD
and rely on his God.*

*¹¹ Behold, all you who kindle a fire,
who equip yourselves with burning torches!
Walk by the light of your fire,
and by the torches that you have kindled!*

We see that the Father has given his son, Jesus the Servant, the power to comfort those who are suffering, to teach them how to live. We fear, that is we

respect and hold in awe, the voice of Jesus. Those of us who have walked in darkness will finally have light. We will walk by the light.

The fourth Servant Song is in Chapters 52 and 53, and to Christians, it is one of the most commonly quoted references to the arrival of the Messiah Jesus found in the Hebrew Scriptures. The break between chapters 52 and 53 is widely considered one of the worst chapter breaks in the Bible, as it divides a continuous song into two parts that might seem unrelated as a result of the chapter break.

Once again, here is a heavily abbreviated version:

- ¹³ *Behold, my servant shall act wisely;
he shall be high and lifted up,
and shall be exalted.*
- ¹⁴ *As many were astonished at you—
his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—*
- ³ *He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.*
- ⁴ *Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.*
- ⁵ *But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace.*
- ⁶ *All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.*

9 And they made his grave with the wicked.

11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. he poured out his soul to death yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

The last part talks about Jesus being beaten, tormented, and crucified, despite being the exalted one, if we accept the traditional Christian interpretation. He has “carried our sorrows”, yet God allowed him to be smitten. He was “pierced” with a sword for our sins, but he brought us peace. We are sheep who have gone astray, and God has found us guilty. The sentence “*And they made his grave with the wicked*” is taken to mean he was crucified alongside criminals. Yet, he will be victorious in the end and will make many of us “righteous”. He will do this by giving his life in exchange for our forgiveness.

There is indeed a lot of language in the four Servant Songs that is reminiscent of the language that we find in the New Testament, especially in the Gospels. But we could imagine that what happened is this: The New Testament writers deliberately cast the story of Jesus in the context of the prophesies of arguably the most influential prophet, Isaiah. This makes sense given the tendency for Christians to interpret the Old Testament in light of the story of

Jesus. But there is another perspective. Jews traditionally view the “suffering servant” in the Servant Songs as the Israelite people themselves, or perhaps the nation of Israel as a whole. It is true that in ancient times, not long after the life of Jesus, and then into medieval times, some Jews interpreted these passages as referring to a person, a promised human Messiah, but not Jesus. Only Christians have seen these four passages as specifically referring to a Messiah who is Jesus.

What would happen if we were to consider the Jewish interpretation of their ancient Prophet Isaiah – and conclude they might be correct? We see issues like this repeatedly as we study the Bible here. Would we somehow be abandoning our faith if we were to accept that not only are many of the stories in the Old and New Testaments not historical, but that they were written and later interpreted to deliberately manipulate readers? The answer is certainly no. The reason is that this assumes a very modern way of viewing the Bible as a document. It’s not true that the first readers of the New Testament thought they were reading something that was as literal as what we might capture today with cameras and microphones. They knew that the authors of both Testaments were taking stories rooted in actual historical accounts and were casting these stories to fit theological goals. This was during a time when there wasn’t a strict separation between fact and fiction. Ancient historical writers, and not just

biblical writers, would approximate ancient orations to give a feel for what was said, rather than doing what we would do today with a speech that wasn't recorded or written down, and that is to only summarize it and then provide a caveat that we don't know exactly what was said. Ancient readers understood how writers of their time worked. Another way of looking at this is that the first readers of the New Testament, especially the Gospels and Acts, read at a deeper level than we do today. We tend to read for facts. They wanted to know what Jesus taught. They were the inheritors of an oral culture, not inheritors of our tendency to be science-minded, to expect literal histories. They were not a culture hung up on knowing tedious facts. So, no, there is nothing wrong with us accepting that our scriptures, both Old and New, should be read for spiritual content. Jesus did exist. He was not an ordinary human. The Bible is not total fiction. We must, however, read it the way it was meant to be read - as an inspired telling of the story of God and Jesus, and their relationships to us.

Consider these facts. The Book of Revelation surely wasn't meant to be read in a literal fashion. Jesus deliberately taught in parables – stories that told principles of faith, stories that were not historical. Jesus used lots of metaphorical and poetic language, calling himself “the way, the truth, and the life”. He called himself a “vine” to explain that he was the source of spiritual life. He called

himself a “gate” as a way of saying that he could tell us how to live so that we could find a route to salvation. The New Testament is full of hyperbole, like saying that you should pluck out your eye if it causes you to sin. So, when it came to interpreting the Old Testament, specifically, the works of the Prophets, in a fashion that explains the powerful role that the teachings of Jesus can have in our eternal lives, the New Testament authors did not see this as manipulative or disingenuous.

So, let’s get back to Sister Marie, who had something very powerful to say to me. She said it always seemed strange to her that we would use the Jewish Bible as our Old Testament, that we would study it in church and in school, if we thought that somehow the Jews were bad or wrong. She said that Jesus himself quotes the Old Testament repeatedly in the New Testament. She said that the Old Testament is beautiful. It tells us about the tendency for people to do sinful things and how we must fight against this. It tells us who God is, and that he is kind and just. She said that the Old Testament is filled with great wisdom, like the Proverbs, that teach us how to live in a moral and happy way. Here is the thing that has stayed with me the strongest: Sister Marie said that if we were to reject the Jews and their Bible, then we would have to reject Jesus, too. He was a Jew and he was there to give us the next installment of the story of God and his

people. The Old Testament didn't lose any of its value, but the story needed to be finished.

Here is how I think we should read the Servant Songs in Isaiah. People who say that the servant is Israel or some prophet other than Jesus who has not yet come or that the servant is Jesus himself are all missing the point. The Prophet Isaiah was teaching us abstract spiritual principles that are not literal in nature. The first song tells us about justice and our responsibility to help God bring it to this world. The second song is about God's desire to restore all of humanity through a covenant with us. The third song is about God's willingness to stay with us, through suffering, to comfort us, to guide us through his Kingdom no matter what life brings. The fourth song is about the eventual restoration of the world spiritually when humanity is finally able to live the way God wants us to. We should read the entire Bible this way. God is real. The Bible, Old and New, is real. But we must read the Bible for its spiritual lessons, not as some sort of literal history. The ancient readers were much wiser than many modern bible readers: they knew what to look for in scripture, and they recognized the depth and the brilliance of the books of the Hebrew Bible, especially Isaiah.