

"Will the Real Rashi Please Stand Up"

Rashi, Rabbi **Shlomo Yitzhaqi** was a famous rabbinical commentator from France. He lived in the 11th century and authored commentaries on the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud. He is seen as one of the top Jewish scholars and his works are revered today as foundational for understanding the proper interpretations of the written and oral Torah.

The 53rd chapter of Isaiah is a critical passage in understanding the work of Messiah. All scholars agree that Messiah is the Redeemer; but a redeemer in what sense? Messiah will redeem Israel and those from the nations that turn to Him in faith. In a similar manner, just as the Hebrews trusted in the Passover lamb in Egypt to bring about Israel's physical redemption from slavery, so too will Messiah provide redemption for the sins, transgressions, and iniquity. Just how will Messiah do this?

Isaiah speaks about a suffering servant in the latter half of his prophecy. Who is this suffering servant? This is a debated issue. Usually one could turn to Rashi and find the answer, but in this case it is not so easy. Isaiah 53 is one of the best known passages dealing with the suffering servant, so should not one just check to see what Rashi says about Isaiah 53 and settle the issue? The answer is not that simple, because in Rashi's commentary on the book of Isaiah, he says that the suffering servant is Israel (the Jewish people). However in Rashi's commentary on the Talmud, in the section called Sanhedrin, he says Isaiah is talking about the Messiah in this chapter. It should be pointed out that not only does Rashi see Isaiah 53 as talking about Messiah in his commentary on Meseket Sanhedrin, but the Talmud itself is discussing Messiah and is using this passage to assist one in understanding the work and nature of Messiah.

Before we study the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, let us deal with the question, Why would Rashi disagree with Rashi? It must be pointed out that Isaiah 53 has been seen as a Messianic passage by most scholars down through the ages. In the book of Acts a Jewish man, who is returning to Ethiopia after coming to Jerusalem to celebrate a festival was seen by Philip reading scripture as he traveled. Philip came near to him and found out the man was reading Isaiah chapter 53. The man did not know about whom the prophet was speaking. In fact he asked Philip the following question,

"...of whom does the prophet speak? Of himself, or of some other man?" Acts 8:34

It is significant that the Jewish man from Ethiopia never considered if the prophet could have been speaking about Israel. Philip answered the man by showing many other scriptures that the prophet was indeed speaking about Messiah. So for more than a thousand years prior to Rashi, scholars, especially Christian, saw this chapter as discussing the Messiah. Rashi might have felt pressure to find some other interpretation for this section when he wrote his commentary on the book of Isaiah. Rashi knew that interpreting this passage as speaking about Messiah would be problematic for those debating against those who felt that this passage describes the suffering of Jesus; therefore Rashi offered a different interpretation, one that differed from other Jewish commentators and from the authority of the Talmud.

It is interesting that today Judaism as a whole is quick to follow Rashi's interpretation from his commentary on the book of Isaiah and to ignore what Rashi wrote in his commentary on Meseket Sanhedrin. Although this tendency serves the desire of Judaism as a whole to reject the possibility that Jesus is the Messiah, there is a major problem with accepting Rashi's view of Isaiah 53 speaking about Israel.

As has been previously stated, the Talmud is not a commentary of scripture, it is seen in Orthodox Judaism as scripture itself and therefore the views of the Talmud are binding. Hence those who ascribe to Orthodox Judaism are not free to disagree with the Talmud. What does Meseket Sanhedrin exactly say about Messiah in relationship to Isaiah 53?

On page 98 side "b" of Sanhedrin, the Gemara begins to discuss the name of Messiah. One should not conclude that the purpose is to know the literal name of Messiah, but terms that describe Him and help the reader understand His character and work. In this discussion five names are provided to assist the reader. One should not conclude that only one of the five names is correct, but in keeping with the rules for interpreting the Talmud all five names are relevant in assisting the reader to understand Messiah. Per this article we will only deal with the fifth name.

The text says that Rabanan offers the name Kheevahrah as the name of Messiah. This word means to be pale skin. The text actually says,

"Rabanan says, Pale in the house of Rabbi is His name (Messiah) for it is written,..."

The Talmud continues and quotes Isaiah 53:4,

"Surely our diseases he did bear, and our pains he carried them; whereas we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted."

Rashi comments that this section is discussing Messiah who is stricken with leprosy and hence Rabanan uses the name Keheevahrah (Pale or white) as to relate this fact to the reader.

What is important is that the Talmud relates three crucial points which Orthodox Judaism cannot reject or even debate, rather every Orthodox Jew must accept and to which their views to Messiah adhere:

- 1) Isaiah chapter 53 relates not to Israel but to the Messiah.
- 2) Messiah suffers for sin for the purpose of bring redemption
- 3) It was G-d's plan to afflict Messiah to accomplish this purpose

Now that it has been properly asserted that according to Orthodox Judaism Isaiah 53 is about Messiah, let us study these verses more closely.

In this article we will lay the foundation for a proper understanding of Isaiah 53 by setting the context provided by Isaiah 52:7-10. These few verses provide an interesting look at the subject of our discussion.

Verse 7 begins the process of revealing to the reader that it is G-d's plan to reign on earth personally. The verse opens by making a statement that Messiah's coming will bring about a significant change in the world. Messiah, Who is the light of the world, will come in a period of spiritual darkness. Prior to Messiah's coming, the world will be in turmoil and suffering hardship. Scholars point to Jeremiah 30:7,

"Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it; and it is a time of trouble for Jacob, but out of it, shall he (Israel) be saved."

Who will be doing the work of salvation? Messiah! Isaiah speaks of this change from trouble, hardship, and suffering to that of "pleasantness",

"How pleasant upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger of good tidings, Who announces peace, that proclaim good tidings, that announces salvation; that says unto Zion: 'Your G-d reigns!'" Isa. 52:7

Why does the prophet speak of this pleasantness upon the mountains? In prophetic writings mountains are often related to seats of governments. Hence what is being said in this verse is that Messiah will not just reign in Israel, but He will bring His righteous rule to every nation. Notice that this verse ends with the proclamation to Zion that, *"Your G-d reigns"*. It is most significant when discuss G-d reigning in Zion that the next verse says,

"Hark, your watchmen! they lift up the voice, together do they sing; for they shall see, eye to eye, the L-RD returning to Zion." Isa.52:8

The context is clear in this verse. Isaiah is speaking not of the Shekinah (dwelling presence of G-d), but Messiah beginning His rule of the Kingdom and taking His seat upon the throne of David. This event is not only joyful, but involves a spiritual change in the people. This change is the focus of the next verse,

"Break forth into joy, sing together, you waste places of Jerusalem; for the L-RD has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem." Isa. 52:9

This verse is speaking about work of redemption that Messiah has accomplished. Obviously redemption centers on dealing with sin. Whereas Isaiah 53 reveals how this redemption will be achieved, the prophet wants to announce the identity of Messiah. This is the purpose in the next verse,

"The L-RD has made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our G-d." Isa. 52:10

It is most significant that this verse focuses on a revelation. What is the object of this revelation? It is the identity of Messiah. How is Messiah revealed? He is revealed as the "holy arm of the L-rd". The term "arm" is a vital word for assisting the reader in understanding the identity of Messiah. As has been addressed many times previously, Hebrew words come from root words that provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the particular word being

addressed. In this case the word "arm" comes from a word that means "to sow a seed". Hence the noun would be "seed". In I Samuel chapter 1 Hannah (a barren wife) prays to the L-rd requesting to give birth to a son,

*"And she vowed a vow, and said: 'O L-RD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your handmaid, and remember me, and not forget Your handmaid, but will give unto Your handmaid a **SON** (the word is "seed" in a masculine form), then I will give him unto the L-RD all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head.'* I Sam. 1:11

Notice that the word normally translated "seed" is translated with the word "son". What is the connection between the word "seed" and the word "son"? In the same way that a seed comes from plant or tree. So too does a child come from his parents. In essence a son is an extension of his father. This idea of extension is also expressed in the word "arm" which is an extension of the body. Isaiah speaks of Messiah as the "holy arm of the L-rd" to emphasize another aspect that fits the context of Messiah work of redemption.

What is this aspect? The actual word used here speaks of an upper portion of the arm. This is what was sacrificed / offered to the L-rd. It is most interesting to note that on the Passover platter the shank bone that represents the Passover lamb is called by the same word that Isaiah used. It is also significant that the lamb was offered to spare the first born son of the family. Hence we once again see the connection between the word Isaiah used (translated "arm') and the concepts of son and sacrifice. This is no accident because Isaiah wants to reveal to the reader that Messiah is the Son of G-d Who will be sacrificed to bring about Israel's redemption. This is exactly on what Isaiah 53 next focuses.

This too will be the focus on our next article.