

Debunking “The Forbidden Chapter” Conspiracy



There are Christian missionaries who claim there is a conspiracy to hide the truth from you.

They assert that “There is a chapter in the Tanach [Jewish scriptures] that used to be read in synagogues, but later, the rabbis decided to take it out of the Haftorah [weekly prophetic readings] ‘to avoid confusion’... and today it is considered ‘The Forbidden Chapter’ hidden from Jews.”

The chapter, which missionaries say the rabbis do not want you to read, is Isaiah 53, which

Christians believe describes the messiah [Jesus] dying for our sins.

This false claim¹ which is easily debunked is a ploy to get people to look at “The Forbidden Chapter” out of context, and thereby accept Jesus. However, when read in context, Isaiah 53 is not speaking about anyone dying “for” our sins. Isaiah describes the Jewish people who suffered “from” the violence perpetrated against them by the nations of the world.

Furthermore, concerning a conspiracy, the missionaries are either intentionally misleading people or are ignorant of the history of the public reading of the prophets.

There are numerous problems with their conspiracy theory:

- 1) There is no rabbinic edict that prohibits Jews from reading any portion of the Jewish bible. On the contrary, the Jewish bible, including the book of Isaiah, is accessible to anyone who wants to read it.
- 2) The weekly prophetic readings, as we know them, were instituted in the 2nd century BCE when King Antiochus forbade Jews from reading from the Torah [Five Books of Moses]. Since the King did not forbid reading from the prophets, the sages instituted the public reading of portions of the prophets that shared a theme corresponding to the outlawed Torah reading. In this way, the weekly lesson would not be forgotten.
- 3) To accomplish their immediate goal the sages used only a small percentage of the prophets. The omission of the remainder of the prophetic writing was not intended to hide their content, to the contrary, they were available to anyone who wanted to study them.
- 4) If the rabbis had conspired to hide prophetic passages which Christians claim to refer to Jesus, they would have not included Isaiah 9:6 as part of the reading for Yitro, as is the custom of many Jewish congregations. Our sages knew that when read in context people would understand that Isaiah 9:6 refers to the righteous King Hezekiah. Similarly, the sages did not “hide” Torah passages which Christians say refer to Jesus.
- 5) As mentioned above, the portions of the prophets were chosen to correspond to the yearly cycle of Torah reading. These were divided into different categories: The Torah portion, holidays, the three weeks leading to the commemoration of the destruction of the Temple on the 9th of Av, and the subsequent 7 weeks of consolation and comfort. Although portions of Isaiah were read for these weeks of comfort, the message contained in Isaiah 53 did not provide this and was not included along with the vast majority of the book of Isaiah.

- 6) Finally, some scholars point out that the Dead Sea Scrolls contain a parchment known as 4Q176. This parchment is also referred to as 4QTanhumi [Tanhumi means comfort] and lists similar chapters from Isaiah to be read as consolation and comfort for the destruction of the Temple. Interestingly, the parchment does not include Isaiah 53, and since Dead Sea Scrolls predated rabbinic Judaism, it refutes the claim that there was a rabbinical conspiracy to hide Isaiah 53 from the public.

If there is a conspiracy, it is by missionaries. They hide the plain and obvious meaning of Isaiah 53 by reading it out of context and by mistranslating crucial words to fit Jesus into the chapter.

As mentioned above, Isaiah 53 must be read in context to understand its true meaning.

Although Isaiah 53 speaks about a “Suffering Servant of God,” anyone who reads Isaiah from the beginning knows that “Israel” is repeatedly referred to as God’s Servant. For example, “*Israel is my Servant*” (Isaiah 41:8), and “*For you, Israel, are my servant*” (Isaiah 44:21).

It is common in Tanach [Jewish Scriptures] to refer to the nation of Israel as a single individual. For example, it says, “*And the people gathered as one man*” (Nehemiah 8:1). In a revealing passage, “*You are My witnesses, says the Lord, and My Servant whom I have chosen*” (Isaiah 43:10), the subject Israel is referred to first in the plural and then in the singular.

So, who and what is Isaiah 53 speaking about?

Starting in Isaiah 52, the prophet describes the reaction of the nations of the world when they witness² the future and ultimate messianic redemption of the Jewish people.

Since the nations viewed the Jewish people scornfully and considered them rejected by God and deserving of divine suffering, they will be shocked and dumbfounded³ when they witness God’s unexpected and glorious redemption of the Jewish people.

At this point, the nations and their leaders will be left wondering, and conclude that the Jewish people did not suffer because God rejected them, as they mistakenly thought; instead, it was because they persecuted the Jewish people beyond what they may have deserved.⁴

This is the meaning of the passage, “*he (Israel) was wounded from our (the nations) transgression and bruised from our iniquities*” (Isaiah 53:5). Israel suffered **from** the mistreatment of the nations.

In English translations of this chapter, missionaries mistranslate the prefix (ל) as “for” rather than “from” to manipulate the text and make it sound like the Servant will suffer **for the sins** of the Jewish people.

This idea that the Jewish people suffered **because of** the nations’ misdeeds is repeated in the passage “*for the transgress of my people they [לְמַלְאָכָא] were stricken*” (Isaiah 53:8). The word [לְמַלְאָכָא] is biblical Hebrew and is a plural word as in, “*a statue that He gave to them*” (Psalm 99:7). Missionaries incorrectly translated this word as “he” in Isaiah 53:7 to make it sound like it is speaking about a single individual, i.e. Jesus.

Furthermore. Christian missionaries incorrectly change the role of Messiah from a physical redeemer from oppression and exile to a spiritual savior from sin.

Although all Jewish commentators believe that the straightforward identification of the servant in Isaiah 53 is Israel, some, on an allegorical level, identify the servant as the messiah. They do so because, as a member of the Jewish people, the messiah can bear the responsibility to alleviate a portion of the punishment on behalf of the rest of the nation.⁵

A similar example of this concept is found in Numbers 4:19-20, where the children of Kehat bear the responsibility by carrying the Ark at considerable risk to themselves, on behalf of the rest of the nation so no one else would die. Amazingly, just before Isaiah 53, Israel is referred to as "*bearers of the vessels of the Lord*" (Isaiah 52:11).

In contrast to Christian belief, no Jewish commentary claims that the Messiah will die for our sins or that we need to believe in, or even know about him, to benefit from his suffering. Even without our knowledge, his suffering alleviates a portion of the nation's suffering.

It is also noteworthy that under the influence of paganism, the early Christians also transformed the Messiah into a deity. The Christian beliefs that the Messiah dies for our sins and is divine are both foreign to Judaism and not based on the Tanach.

I have presented a brief overview of Isaiah 53 and how missionaries distort the original text to fit Jesus into the picture. This overview also demonstrated the danger of reading passages or a chapter out of context.

If you would like a more in-depth and analytical explanation of Isaiah 53 Jews for Judaism has multiple resources including <https://jewsforjudaism.org/knowledge/articles/isaiah-53-verse-verse> on our website and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeOtzTaAco> on our YouTube channel.

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¹ Although missionaries attribute this claim to an obscure "17th-century Jewish historian, Raphael Levy" they fail to produce evidence of his statement. Interestingly, one Jew matching Levy's description refused to accept Christianity and died a martyr.

² "*God will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations*" (Isaiah 52:10). God's "arm" is associated with His redemption, as in, "*I will redeem you with an outstretched arm*" (Exodus 6:6).

³ "*Kings will shut their mouths...For they will see what they have not been told*" (Isaiah 52:15).

⁴ In my opinion, this explanation is substantiated in part by the events of March 2000 when Pope John Paul II – leader of the world's almost one billion Roman Catholics – asked for forgiveness for the unspeakable suffering Jews endured at the hands of Christians. This is especially relevant considering how nearly every nation of the United Nations unjustly and disproportionality condemn Israel at every opportunity.

⁵ Alleviating communal punishment is not the same as removing someone's sin which remains the individual's responsibility.