

ISSUES

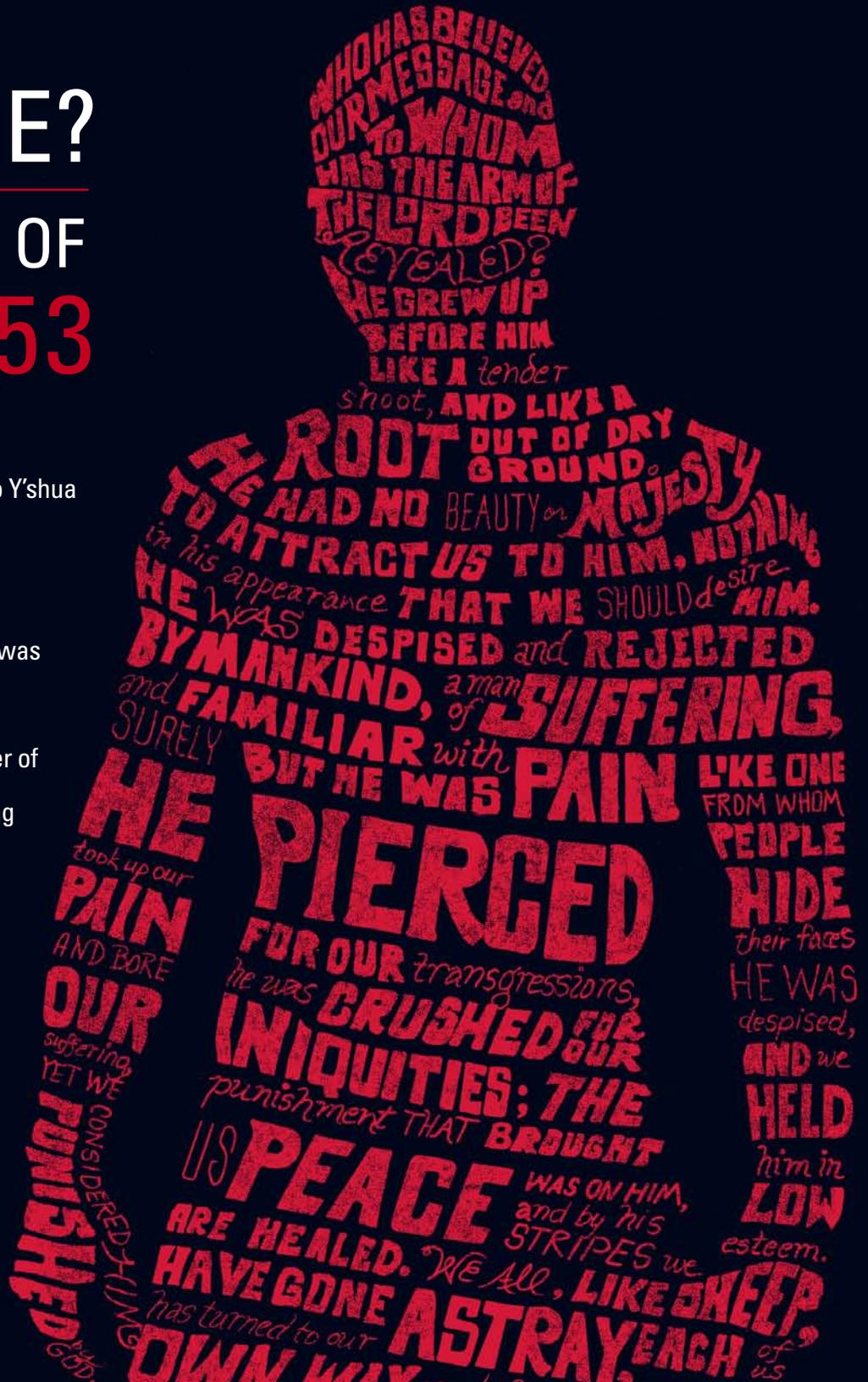
A · M E S S I A N I C · J E W I S H · P E R S P E C T I V E

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WHO IS HE? THE MYSTERY OF ISAIAH 53

Do the Hebrew Scriptures point to Y'shua (Jesus)? He said they did: "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). The 53rd chapter of Isaiah stirs much debate. Is it speaking about the Messiah? If so, does it describe Jesus?

In this edition, we tackle this controversy and share the stories of one secular and two Orthodox Jews who were greatly impacted by Isaiah 53 on their way to believing in Y'shua.



RABBIS, SKEPTICS AND THE SUFFERING MESSIAH by Daniel Mann

If anyone was a skeptic about Jews believing in Jesus, I was. Born to second-generation Jewish American parents in Brooklyn, I experienced much anti-Semitism growing up in the 1950s and '60s. Since my persecutors weren't Jewish, I assumed they were Christian. When I was fourteen, there was talk that a certain Jewish family in my neighborhood had converted to Christianity. I was filled with disgust. How could Jews do such a thing?

As a young adult, I had a lot of pent-up resentment against Christianity. I enjoyed ridiculing anyone who tried to talk with me about Jesus. But I was spiritually hungry. I moved to Israel, lived on a *kibbutz*, visited a Hasidic *yeshiva* to ask questions, but returned to the United States still wondering how to really connect with God—a Jewish God, not a Christian one.

People kept telling me about Jesus. I had a great problem with him. Many Jews had died in his name, and many who hated Jews called themselves Christian. And the idea of someone dying on a cross for me seemed like a bunch of hocus-pocus.

But I kept meeting Christians who seemed genuine in their love and concern for me, and their prayers for me seemed to “work.” So finally I prayed, “God, if Jesus is the Savior and Messiah that the Hebrew prophets wrote about, you’re going to have to show me.”

As I studied the Bible, I began to see how Jesus could have fulfilled many of the prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures. I also discovered that the New Testament wasn't something arbitrarily tacked onto the Hebrew Bible by people who hated Jews. I was shocked to learn that Jews had written it and that Jesus himself was a Jew.

One of the most convincing passages showing that the Messiah would make the ultimate sacrifice and die for our sins was Isaiah 53.

Present-day rabbis disagree. Rashi (1040–1105 A.D.) might have been the first to deny that this incredible passage is messianic. But many Jewish sages, before and after Rashi,

saw the Messiah in Isaiah 53.

The highly regarded first-century Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai stated: “The meaning of the words ‘bruised for our iniquities’ [Isaiah 53:5] is, that since the Messiah bears our iniquities, which produce the effect of his being bruised, it follows that whoso will not admit that the Messiah thus suffers for our iniquities, must endure and suffer them for them himself.”¹

Rabbi Moshe Alshich, a famous sixteenth-century scholar, asserted: “[Our] Rabbis with one voice, accept and affirm the opinion that the prophet [Isaiah 53] is speaking of king Messiah.”²

In contrast, today's rabbis have rallied around the assertion that the “Suffering Servant” of Isaiah 53 is the nation of Israel and not the Messiah. Let's take a look:

Isaiah 53:1–3:

Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

Throughout Isaiah 53, the masculine singular pronoun “he” is used to designate the suffering servant. This pronoun is very rarely used in regards to Israel. More usually, Israel is referred to as “you,” she/her,” and “they/them.” But there is no problem at all using “he” in reference to the Messiah.

Isaiah 53:4–6:

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken

by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Just a quick read through the Prophets will show that Israel could not even bear its own sins, let alone those of others. It was our Jewish people who had “gone astray” and “turned to our own way.”

According to the revered twelfth-century Jewish scholar Ramban (Nachmanides), the Redeemer is the *Messiah*:

Yet he carried our sicknesses, being himself sick and distressed for the transgressions which should have caused sickness and distress in us, and bearing the pains which we ought to have experienced. But we, when we saw him weakened and prostrate, thought that he was stricken, smitten of God. The chastisement of our peace was upon him—for God will correct him; and by his stripes we were healed.³

While today's rabbis deny substitutionary atonement—one man dying for the sins of the world—this had not previously been the case. The mystical Zohar records:

The children of the world are members one of another. When the Holy One desires to give healing to the world, he smites one just man amongst them, and for his sake heals all the rest. Whence do we learn this? From the saying, “He was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities” (Isaiah 53:5). (Numbers, Pinchus, 218a)



Daniel Mann

Isaiah 53:7:

He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

We cannot find any biblical references to affirm that Israel was silent in the face of oppression. But we do find that this is true of Jesus. Before the Sanhedrin, he remained silent. When he finally spoke, it only aided the prosecution:

But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” “I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked. (Mark 14:61–63)

Jesus astonished Pilate with his silence: “Then Pilate asked him, ‘Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?’ But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor” (Matthew 27:13–14).

Isaiah 53:8–9:

By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? *(continued on page 8)*



WHY AREN'T OUR PEOPLE TOLD THIS? by Matt Sieger



Debbie Landers in 1993

Many Jewish refugees from Russia settled in Omaha, Nebraska, between the 1880s and World War I. Among them were Debbie Landers' grandparents. Landers, born Deberah Schwartz in Omaha in 1951, and her younger sister were raised Orthodox by their parents. The Schwartzes were one of just four Jewish families in a primarily Catholic neighborhood.

Unfortunately, Debbie still remembers taunts of "Christ killer" and "dirty Jew" from the neighborhood children. But she has good memories of family holiday celebrations, which included her grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. She followed her parents' advice to always do *mitzvahs* for others. She considered this the best way to stay in good favor with God.

But her feelings toward God changed when her father died of a heart attack when she was fifteen.

"I thought, *How could you take my father from me? How could you do that?*" she recalls.

When other important people in her life died over the next ten years, she became still more hardened toward God. She began to wonder, *Who's next?* She was especially fearful on Yom Kippur, when she pictured God with a big book with her name in it as well as the names of other people she loved.

Her father's death did motivate her professionally. She attended college and became a nurse.

"I wanted to be a nurse because I love taking care of people," says Debbie, "and I wanted to be able to care for people like my father, who had a heart condition." She worked in the coronary care unit of an Omaha hospital for several years.

Although God wasn't part of her life, a full-page ad in a major magazine caught her eye when she was in her twenties.

"It was a picture of a guy with dark hair, very handsome" Debbie says. "It was an ad for Jews for Jesus, and I thought,

Wow! What is this!? I wasn't offended—just surprised."

When she was 25, she and Richard Pearl were married under the *chuppah*. They lived in Milwaukee, where Richard worked for the *Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*. They had two children, Laura and Andrew. When Richard's brother asked him to work for his paint company, the Pearls relocated to St. Louis.

Debbie had begun to experience weakness on one side of her body, dizziness and difficulty walking, and the symptoms intensified after Andrew's birth. In 1983 she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis; she sank into depression.

She and Richard were experiencing much tension in their marriage, and they divorced in 1987. After a lull in her MS symptoms, Debbie joined the singles group at the Jewish Community Center and met Myke Landers, whom she married later that year.

"Everything seemed to be going well," says Debbie, "but then my body went on the blink. I was so sick and miserable."

One night, when the pain was unbearable, she telephoned her good friend Sue, a Jewish woman she had met a few years before at an MS support group. Sue asked, "Do you have a Bible?" Debbie grabbed her Hebrew Scriptures, and Sue asked her to read the 53rd chapter of the book of Isaiah aloud over the phone.

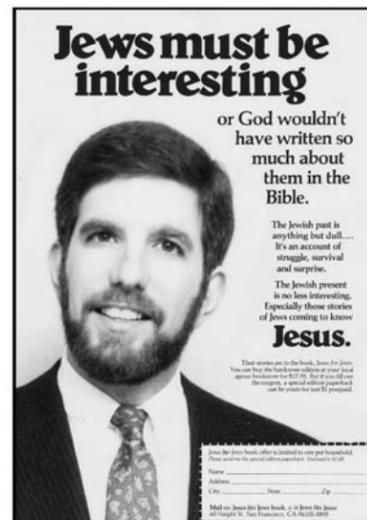
After reading it, Debbie asked, "Who is this man they are talking about?"

"It's all about Jesus," Sue replied.

"You're kidding me. What? He's there? He's in Isaiah?"

"He's all through the Hebrew Scriptures."

Until that moment, Sue had never told Debbie that she was a



An early *Jews for Jesus* ad like Debbie saw

Jewish believer in Jesus. But more shocking to Debbie was the thought that Isaiah might be writing about Jesus. She determined to find out if it was true.

"I told my husband that night," she recalls, "We have to go get a Bible [one that included the New Testament]." So she and Myke went to a bookstore and the saleswoman showed them a section full of Bibles.

"I didn't know which one to get," Debbie remembers. "The Holy Scriptures I owned were in the Masoretic text and hard to read. So I asked her, 'Do you have a Bible that you can understand what you're reading?' So she showed me one called *The Book*, and we got that."

Debbie began with the first five books of Moses. In 1988, when her husband was away one Saturday with his military Reserve unit, Debbie and her children went to Shabbat service. After the service Debbie felt ill, so she and the kids left right away. On Monday the rabbi phoned to ask if there was anything he could do. Eager to discuss the Scriptures—specifically Isaiah 53—Debbie asked him to stop by.

"When the rabbi arrived," Debbie says, "I asked him about Isaiah 53. He tried to tell me the passage was about Israel. But I knew it wasn't. I asked him, 'Why aren't our people told that this is about Jesus?' And he had no answer."

Soon afterwards, Debbie had another serious bout with her MS.

"I was doing childcare in our house, and I was so sick," she recalls. "I asked my next-door neighbor to help me put the children down for a nap. I just had to lie down on my bed. Then she asked if she could pray for me. When I said okay, she asked, 'Do you mind if I pray in the name of Jesus?' I said, 'That's fine.' She also suggested that I read the Gospel of John in the New Testament.

"So I began to read John, and I didn't see anything bad. As a child in Sunday school, I learned maybe one sentence about Jesus: 'He was a rabbi, a good man and maybe a prophet.' But that was it. So I decided, *I'm going to read these other men here—Matthew, Mark and Luke*. And I was so fascinated, I could not read enough."

As she continued to read, she became convinced that

WE ALL, LIKE SHEEP, HAVE GONE ASTRAY, EACH OF US HAS TURNED ^{to his} OWN way; AND THE LORD HAS LAID ON HIM THE INIQUITY OF US ALL.

Jesus was indeed Israel's promised Messiah. With the encouragement of another Jewish woman in her neighborhood who believed in Jesus, Debbie decided to follow him.

All was not rosy after that. Her MS got worse over the next couple of years, and her newfound faith amplified problems in her marriage to Myke. They divorced in 1992. Then in 1997, a biopsy of a lump in her neck revealed that she had non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Debbie worked in a St. Louis bread company at the time, and when she shared the news, a co-worker said, "Oh Debbie, you're a goner." Debbie replied, "Oh, no I'm not. I know without the shadow of a doubt that when I die I'm going to live with God in his presence forever."

Debbie is still going strong. "The cancer is in my bone marrow," Debbie says. "It is stage four, but all these years it's been indolent [slow-growing], for which I thank the Lord."

She returned to nursing in 2005 and now attends to those with dementia and Alzheimer's at a residential care center.

"I was a mess on the outside," Debbie says. "But God healed me from the inside out. He changed me over time. And he continues to change me as I go deeper with my Y'shua [Jesus], whom I love so much." ■

(continued from page 3)

For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

DO ISAIAH 53 AND OTHER HEBREW SCRIPTURES SPEAK OF JESUS?

Jesus was deprived of justice (“judgment”) and was killed. Israel was not “cut off

from the land of the living.” It is also clearly untrue that Israel “had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his [Israel’s] mouth.” At times, the prophets charged that our people had morally descended below the gentiles. The Gospels declare that Jesus’ grave was with both the wicked and the rich, as he died with sinners and was buried in a rich man’s tomb.

Isaiah 53:10–11:

Yet it was the LORD’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.

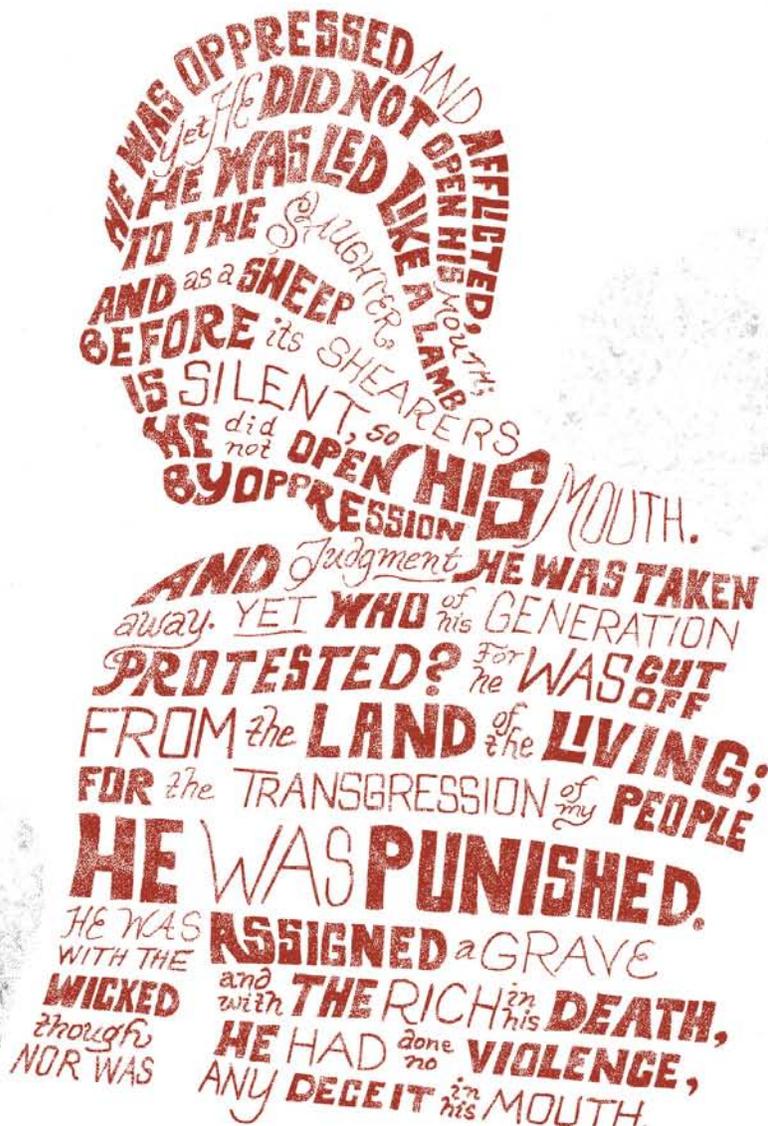
There is no reason to suppose that Israel’s death could represent “an offering for sin.” Sin offerings had to be without any blemish. But we were covered with them. How could the knowledge of Israel “justify many?” But faith (knowledge) in the Messiah will.

This servant, who dies as a sin offering for the people, will eventually “see the light of life and be satisfied.” He will live subsequent to his death—a cryptic reference to the resurrection.

Isaiah says that this servant will bear the iniquities of many. When I first studied this passage as a young man, it began to dawn on me that I personally needed to be forgiven for my wrongdoing, what the Bible calls “iniquities.” And this servant—who was looking to me more and more like Jesus—had made that possible.

Jesus told the Jewish religious leaders of his day, “You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39). Do Isaiah 53 and other Hebrew Scriptures speak of Jesus? Does the New Testament confirm this? Do as I did. Read and decide. ■

Daniel Mann, a Jewish believer in Jesus, has been teaching apologetics and theology at the New York School of the Bible since 1992. For a more in-depth look at Isaiah 53, read his article at <http://mannsword.blogspot.com/2013/02/rabbis-skeptics-and-suffering-messiah.html>. Find additional resources to more fully explore the implications of Isaiah 53 at j4j.co/isaiah53



1. Adolf Neubauer, *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah: According to Jewish Interpreters* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1969), p. xl.
2. Rachmiel Frydland, *What the Rabbis Know about the Messiah: A Study of Genealogy and Prophecy* (Clarksville, MD: Messianic Jewish Resources International, 2002), p. 53.
3. Neubauer, op. cit., p. 81.