



# Isaiah 53 and the Synagogue

By Mottel Baleston

**Question: Have the Rabbis taken Isaiah 53 out of Jewish Bibles?**

**Answer: No, they have not, but like many things in life, the fullest, most helpful, and most accurate response to your question goes beyond a simple yes or no, so let's get started.**

In a traditional Sabbath/Saturday morning mainstream Orthodox Jewish worship service, there are a number of liturgical Bible readings that are typically done. In the annual cycle of readings in an Orthodox synagogue, they will chant through the entire five books of Moses from a handwritten Torah scroll and do it in the original Hebrew. That means each week they typically have a cantor or a Torah reader chant through approximately four or five chapters. This is done aloud as a main part of the service. Once the Torah reading is concluded, a second reading called "the *Haftarah*" is done. This usually takes the form of approximately 20 verses from a passage in the Prophets that is somehow related by theme to that week's Torah portion. This custom of readings from the Prophets was instituted by the rabbis over 2000 years ago. So if only 20 verses or so are being read out of the Prophets each week, one has to be very selective. If you think this through, this means that most of the prophetic writings are not chanted in a liturgical way in the course of a year before the same cycle repeats. However, before one starts to criticize some imagined neglect, recognize that most churches don't even publicly read five percent of the Bible from the pulpit in a typical year.

The controversy about Isaiah 53 comes about this way: Each of the weekly Bible liturgical sections follows a long-established order, and each of the Sabbaths of the year has a specific name. Each summer, one of the Sabbaths is called *Shoftim*. Its assigned Torah reading is Deuteronomy 16–21. Its associated Haftarah reading from the Prophets is Isaiah 51:12 through 52:12. The very next week, the Sabbath service is called *Ki Teitze*, and its Torah reading is Deuteronomy 21–25. Its associated Haftarah reading from the Prophets is Isaiah 54:1–10. That two-week stretch is what gave rise to the false rumor in some Christian circles that Isaiah 53 has been taken out of the Hebrew Bible. However, the fact is that Isaiah 53 is in every Jewish published Bible, whether in the original Hebrew or English translation. But as one can see above, because Isaiah 52 is read one week and the next week Isaiah 54 is read, some people imagine that Isaiah 53 was intentionally skipped. The mainstream rabbinical rebuttal of this theory is that the very next week after Isaiah 54 is read, Isaiah 60 is read. Why Isaiah 60? Because it has some thematic connection with the Torah portion of that week. In this way, mainstream Judaism points out that, like many portions in the Proph-

ets that are not read, it is only because they have no thematic connection with one of the Torah portions. While that is certainly an understandable and defensible argument, one is left to wonder if it is the main reason. Many rabbis long ago warned against beginners reading Isaiah 53 lest they become "mised." So, could it be that Isaiah 53 is actually not included in the cycle of Haftarah readings intentionally, and the reason is the concern that people would recognize it as a prophecy that finds its best fulfillment in Yeshua of Nazareth? I can think of a number of Mosaic Torah portions to which Isaiah 53 can be thematically related very well.

In this response, I've attempted to explain the question regarding Isaiah 53 from both sides. As a Jewish believer in Yeshua, the Jewish Messiah, I am fully convinced from the text itself that Isaiah 53 has strong references to Messiah alone.



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# Isaiah 53

<sup>1</sup> Who has believed our report?  
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

<sup>2</sup> For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant,  
And as a root out of dry ground.  
He has no form or comeliness;  
And when we see Him,  
There is no beauty that we should desire Him.

<sup>3</sup> He is despised and rejected by men,  
A Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.  
And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him;  
He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.

<sup>4</sup> Surely He has borne our griefs  
And carried our sorrows;  
Yet we esteemed Him stricken,  
Smitten by God, and afflicted.

<sup>5</sup> But He was wounded for our transgressions,  
He was bruised for our iniquities;  
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,  
And by His stripes we are healed.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> He was oppressed and He was afflicted,  
Yet He opened not His mouth;  
He was led as a lamb to the slaughter,  
And as a sheep before its shearers is silent,  
So He opened not His mouth.

<sup>8</sup> He was taken from prison and from judgment,  
And who will declare His generation?  
For He was cut off from the land of the living;  
For the transgressions of My people He was stricken.

<sup>9</sup> And they made His grave with the wicked—  
But with the rich at His death,  
Because He had done no violence,  
Nor was any deceit in His mouth.

<sup>10</sup> Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise Him;  
He has put Him to grief.  
When You make His soul an offering for sin,  
He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days,  
And the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand.

<sup>11</sup> He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied.  
By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many,  
For He shall bear their iniquities.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the great,  
And He shall divide the spoil with the strong,  
Because He poured out His soul unto death,  
And He was numbered with the transgressors,  
And He bore the sin of many,  
And made intercession for the transgressors.