

An Sampling of Jewish-Christian Polemics on Isaiah 53

Ruth Rabbah 2:14

He is speaking of the king Messiah: "Come hither," draw near to the throne; "and eat of thy bread," that is the bread of the kingdom; "and dip thy morsel in vinegar," this refers to chastisements, as it is said, "But he was wounded for our transgression, bruised for our iniquities."

Rashi

"Behold at the end of day, my servant Jacob will succeed, the righteous among them."

Nahmanides

"What is accurate about this portion is that is about Israel in its entirety, as in the words 'do not fear my servant, Jacob' (Isaiah 44:2) and it says, 'my servant you are, that in you I will be glorified (ibid. 49:3), but on the opinion of the commentaries who relate it to the messiah, we need to explain it according to the words of the books, in unison, it says that messiah son of David about whom the scripture is speaking will not be defeated and will not die at the hands of his enemies and so do the scriptures indicate clearly."

Justin Martyr, First Apology 1:50

"But that, having become man for our sakes, He endured to suffer and to be dishonoured, and that He shall come again with glory, hear the prophecies which relate to this; they are these: 'Because they delivered His soul unto death, and He was numbered with the transgressors, He has borne the sin of many, and shall make intercession for the transgressors. For, behold, My Servant shall deal prudently, and shall be exalted, and shall be greatly extolled'....Accordingly, after He was crucified, even all His acquaintances forsook Him, having denied Him; and afterwards, when He had risen from the dead and appeared to them, and had taught them to read the prophecies in which all these things were foretold as coming to pass, and when they had seen Him ascending into heaven, and had believed, and had received power sent thence by Him upon them, and went to every race of men, they taught these things, and were called apostles."

Cyril of Alexandria Letter 41.10.

Thus...[Jesus]...became a victim...and the divinely inspired prophet Isaiah will also vouch for this, saying, "we had all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way, but the lord laid upon him the guilt of us all."

Augustine, *Exposition on the Psalms*

Who hath believed our hearing, and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?" *[Isaiah 53:1]* "For who hath heard?" The Jews believe not: they have turned them to the nations, and have preached. The Jews did not believe;

What is, "Thy right hand," but Thy Christ, of whom it is said, And to whom is the Arm of the Lord revealed? *[Isaiah 53:1]*

Yaakov ben Reuven, Milhemet HaShem, Gate V

"Was he [Jesus] ever in pain from even from a headache...it needed to say nau'ah muke anashim" [*afflicted, hit by men*, plural]...it is found that God hits, and how is it possible to say that he is God?...and in reality we find that he did not live long...

The Tension in Abravanel's Interpretation

Identifying actor and acted upon:

(יד) ואמנם אמרו אחר זה כאשר שממו עליך רבים...מוכיח על מה שאמרתי לך פעמים רבות שהנביאים היו מדברים פעם לנכח ופעם שלא לנכח ולכן אמר כנגד ישראל בלשון נכח כאשר שממו עליך רבים ושאר הפרשה כולה באה בלשון **נסתר** כן משחת מאיש מראהו כן יזה ושאר הפסוקים כולם...

However, it saying after this, "just as many were appalled by him"...proves what I told you many times that the prophets sometimes were speaking directly and sometimes not directly. "Just as many were appalled and the rest of the pericope all comes in hidden language," so too "so marred was his appearance" and "just so he should startle" and the rest of all the verses...

Abravanel dismisses the possibility that God rejects the Jewish people

ואמנם בפירוש וה' חפץ דכאו החלי לפי שלא ישרו בעיני דרכי המפרשים.... אמנם הדרך השלישי הוא הנכון אצלי, יאמר הנביא כמשיב על דברי מלכי האומות הנה גלות ישראל אף על פי שגניח שהוא בחטאתיו לא היה עולמי לנצח נצחים כי לא יעשה השם כלייה בעמו ובנחלתו להסירם מעל פניו לעד, אבל היה כדי לדכאו ביסורין כאשר ייסר איש את בנו, וזהו וה' חפץ דכאו

And however in the explanation of “but God chose to crush him,” for the ways of the commentators did not seem right in my eyes...however the third way is accurate, and that is the correct one as far as I am concerned, the prophet is speaking as if he is responding to the words of the kings of the nations: behold the exile of Israel, even if we assume was because of their sins, was not eternal forever and ever, for God would not affect the annihilation of his nation and his inheritance to remove them from him eternally, but it was in order to lower him with affliction, just as a person would afflict their son, and that is “but God chose to crush him.”

Abravanel rejects vicarious atonement

...הנה התבאר מזה שהחליים והמכאובות שהיו ראויים לבוא על האומות היו ישראל נושאים וסובלים אותם ולא נאמר גם כן שהוא היה מקבל מאת האלהים העונש שהיה ראוי לבוא על האומות בעבור פשעיהם כמו שחשבו חכמי הנצרים שהיה דעתנו היהודים כזה, כי לדעתנו לא כיון הנביא לדבר מזה אבל הוא כולו כמו שפירשתי שיחס חולינו ומכאובינו הוא יחס הדבר אל הפועל לא אל המתפעל והמקבל

Behold it was clarified from this that the sicknesses and the aches that were supposed to be upon the nations the Israel was carrying and bearing and it does not also say that he was receiving from God the punishment that was supposed to be upon the nations because of their sins, as the wise ones of the Christians [suggest] that the mindset of the Jews was in this fashion, for to our mind the prophet did not intend to speak of this, but the entirety is how I explained that our sickness and aches he attributed the matter to the subject and not the object and the receiver.

In his 2nd interpretation, Abravanel accepts the possibility of vicarious atonement:

אף אמנם לא ידו של פרעה נכה נגעה ביאשיו להרגו אכן חלינו הוא נשא ומכאובינו הוא סבלם רוצה לומר אנחנו סבבנו לו ליאשיו החולי והמכאוב שסבל לא פרעה נכה ויהיה חלינו ומכאובינו כנוי לפעל שחטאתם היתה סבת מות יאשיו לא גבורת פרעה, או יהיה חלינו ומכאובינו כנוי לבעל הדבר כלומר החלאים והמכאובות שהיינו ראויים אנחנו לקבלם כפי פשעינו ונשא וסבל אותם אותו צדיק בעדינו ולכן אנחנו חשבנוהו נגוע מוכה אלהים ומעונה שמיד האלהים היה נגעו ומיתתו לא מיד פרעה נכה כי הוא היה מחולל מפשעינו מדוכה מעונותינו, ולהיות מיתתו ברשעת דורו היה הפועל אותה באמת השם יתברך השופט כל הארץ לא פרעה נכה כי הוא לא היה כי אם כמו כלי מיתה כחרב ביד ההורג והראיה על זה שמוסר שלומינו עליו ובחבורתו נרפא לנו רוצה לומר שבמיתתו הוסר השלום והבטחון שהיה לנו עליו בעודו בחיים חיותו.....

But however it was not the hand of Pharaoh Necho that touched Josiah to kill him but rather our sickness he carried and our aches he bore, meaning that we caused Josiah the sickness and suffering that he bore, not Pharaoh Necho, and our sickness and suffering are an expression for action, that their sins were the cause of the death of Josiah not the strength of Pharaoh, or the sickness and aches are an expression for the relevant party, that is to say the sickness and suffering that were were supposed to receive according to our sins, and he carried and bore them – that righteous person for us, and therefore we thought him plagued and smitten by God and afflicted, for it was from the hand of God that was his plague and his death not through the hand of Pharaoh Necho because he was wounded because of our sins,

crushed because of our inequity. And because his death was as a result of the wickedness of his generation the true cause was God may he be blessed, the judge of the all the earth, not Pharaoh Necho, for he was merely a vessel for death like a sword in the hand of the killer and the proof for this was “he bore the chastisement that made us whole,” meaning to say that in his death the peace and the security that we had while he was still alive was removed...

The Tension in Ibn Kaspi's Commentary

Are the wounds associated with the actor or with that which is acted upon?

ובאר בדרך שהגזרות והמלות מונחות בכל זה לפי ההגיון, ולכן לא יוכל חכם נוצרי לחלוק בזה, כי הוא ידוע בעברי ובהגיון כי שמות הפעולה מצטרפים פעם עם הפועל ופעם עם הפועל, כאומרו על דרך משל כמהפכת אלהים {את} סדום {ואת} עמורה (עמוס ד' י"א), וכן הכל. לכן אמרו בכאן חליינו ומכאובינו – הוא מצטרף עם הפועל כי הגוים היו מחליאים ומכאיבים לישראל, וזה שאין ספק שישראל היו חולים וכואבים, כמו שקדם הספור על ישראל בכלל שהיה איש מכאובות וידוע חולי (ישעיהו נ"ג:ג'), אבל מה שהיה בספק אצל הרואים, הוא מי היה המחליא והמכאיב, רוצה לומר מי היה הפועל והסבה המטעה בעצם לזה המקרה הרע, כי זה הוא מה שיעלם מהרואים וגם מהרופאים ברב ולכן יטעו, וכן טעו אלה הגוים בחלי זה עם ישראל, כי היו חושבים שהאל יתעלה הוא הפועל בעצם לחלי ישראל לעילה ידועה אצלו בגוף ישראל, ולא כן היה הדבר אם אנחנו היינו הפועלים בזה בעצם, כי הוא היה בריא הגוף, אבל אנחנו החלינוהו בהציקנו לו ובהכתינו אותו, וזו מליצה נכבדת ואמתית.

And it explained along the way that the construction and words are arranged according to logic, and so a wise Christian cannot disagree with this, for it is known in Hebrew and in logic that the verbs are sometimes connected sometimes to the actor and sometimes to that which is acted upon, as it says in the way of an example, in God's turning over of Sodom and Gomorrah and so is everything else. Therefore [when] it says here sickness and suffering – it connects to the subject, for these nations were sickening and afflicting Israel, and this is because there is no doubt that Israel was sick and hurting, just as it was preceded by a story about Israel, so in general they were a man of suffering, familiar with disease. But was what in doubt to those who were seeing this was who was the cause of the sickness and the smiting, meaning to say who was the actor and the mistaken cause for this bad occurrence, because this is what was hidden from the seers and from the doctors mainly and therefore they made a mistake, and this is how these nations made a mistake about this sickness with respect to Israel, for they thought that it was God, may he be elevated, is ultimately the actor [behind] the sickness of Israel, for some cause that is known to him in the body of Israel, but it was not so if we were the subject ultimately, for he was healthy in his body but we made him sick in bothering and striking him, and this is a respectful and true suggestion.

Does God want the nations to do this?

ואמנם עדין צריכים אנו לדעת אחד הכרחי, והוא אם כשהגוים מחליאים ומכאיבים לישראל, אם הוא פשע ועון בידם בבחירתם הרעה או הוא זכות וצדקה להם, כלומר אם הוא פעל רע או טוב בעיני השם. והנה גם בזאת הכונה השנית טעו הגוים כי הם חשבו שהיה זה טוב בעיני השם, כי חשבו שבצדקתם מצורף לרשעת ישראל

היה זה... ([דברים ט"ו](#)), וכל זה נכלל במובן מאמרם ואנחנו חשבנוהו נגוע מכה אלהים ומענה. (ה) ולכן יכירו הגוים האלה גם כן האמת בזאת הבקשה ויודו ויאמרו הם: כי ישראל היה מחולל מפשעינו מדוכא מעונותינו וגו', וזה סוד גדול שגלה ישעיה במליצה שיחס אותה לגוים, וגם יותר נמרץ ממה שאמר משה לעמנו לא בצדקתך וגו' כי אם ברשעת וגו' ([דברים ט"ה](#))

But we still need one necessary fact, and that is whether when the nations plague and hurt Israel if it is an iniquity and sin in their hands in choosing the evil or if it is a merit and charity for them, that is to say if it is a bad or good act in the eyes of God. And behold also in this second intention the nations erred because they thought that this was good in the eyes of God, because they thought that in their righteousness it was added to the wickedness of Israel...and all this is included in what is understood by their statement "and we accounted him plagues, smitten and afflicted by God." And therefore the nations will also understand the truth in this request and will admit and will say: for Israel was "wounded because of our sins, crushed because of our iniquities," and this is a great secret that Isaiah revealed in his suggestion that he attributed it to the nations, and it is even more intense than what Moses told our nation, not from your righteousness, but with the wickedness etc...

Does Israel take any of the blame?

.... (ט-יב) אולם ויתן את רשעים קברו... זה ענין יקר מאד, והוא אמת וצודק, אך בשיובן בעיון דק, וזה מה שאינו ראוי לבארו בזה הספר. ואולם מה שיובן מזה בעיון גס אשר מצד זה אמרו וכתבו ישעיה להמון כולו, והוא להסיר כל דעת רע מעמנו, ובאור זה שאין ספק שבני עמנו היו תמיד חכמים וצדיקים בעיניהם... ולכן כי היו רואים ששאר האומות שאינן מדת משה ויהודית היו גוברות עליהם, היו מדברים באלהים תמיד להתלונן ולהתאונן.... ולכן הוכרח ישעיה לומר טענה כוללת, ושלא יוכלו בני המון לסתור אותה, וזה שכאשר היה הנביא אומר להם שהם רעים או סכלים וחסרים, הם אומרים: לא כן, אבל אנחנו צדיקים וחסידים, גם חכמים ושלמים, כי לא היו יודעים גדר אלה התארים על האמת, וכמו שהוא ענינו גם היום בעוננו.... וכאלו אמר נניח שאתם גם בניכם אחרים כולכם צדיקים ואין חסם בכפיכם ואין מרמה בפיכם, הנה השם חפץ לדכא ולהחליא אתכם.... אם תשים אשם נפשו וגו'..., וזה כי אחר שכן רצה השם, ואין לנו דבר אחר רצונו וחפצו מה לנו לעשות רק שנעשה עצמנו כקרבן וכחטאת, כמ"ש החסיד הריני מוטל לפניו כאבן שאין לה הופכין (בבלי ע"ז ח'):.... וזה ידוע לבקיאם בגמרא, רוצה לומר היות שתי אלו הכונות לחכמי התלמוד, וידוע י"י את אשר לו... אבל דרך האמת לא היה זה העם בגלותו בכלל פשעים ורשעים, אבל היו צדיקים, כמ"ש עליו כבלע רשע צדיק ממנו ([חבקוק א' י"ג](#)), רק שכן רצה וחפץ השם. ואולם יבואו עליו יסורין וגלות ומיתות כי הוא, כמו שיתודו באחרית גם המשחיתים אותו, נשא חטא רבים ולפשעים יפגיע. והפליג לדקדק בלשון העברי, ולא אמר: ובפשעים יפגיע, כי זה הפך, אבל ולפשעים – כלומר כי הוא הניע הפשעים שיפגעו בו, אם כן הוא הפגיע לפשעים, כלומר היה הוא סבה פועלת שהפשעים יפגעו בו, וזה אמת מכמה צדדים.

However "and his grave was set among the wicked"...this is a previous matter, and it is true and accurate, but when it is understood in a thin analysis, this is not fitting to explain in this book. But what can be understood from a thick analysis, which from this perspective it is said and spoken by Isaiah to the entire masses, and that is to remove all bad thoughts from us, and the explanation is that there is no doubt that the people of our nation were always wise

and righteous in their own eyes...and therefore they would see that the other nations that are not from the faith of Moses and the Jews were overpowering them. And they would speak against God to complain and express their woes. And therefore Isaiah was forced to offer an inclusive claim, which the masses could not refute, and this was that when the prophet said to them that they are bad or foolish and incomplete they would say: not so, but we are righteous and pious, and wise and whole, for they did not know the parameters for these terms in truth, just as it is our issue also today in our sins...and it is as if it said, let us assume that you and your children after you are all righteous and there is no wrongdoing in your hands and no treachery in your mouths, behold God is still interested in crushing and plaguing you..."that if he made himself an offering for guilt" is because this is what God wanted, and we have nothing other than his will and desire, what can we do but make ourselves like an expiatory and sin offering, like the pious person said I am placed before you like a stone which has no one to turn it (b. Avodah Zara 8b)...this is known to those who are experts in Gemara, that is to say the two intentions known to the wise scholars of the Talmud, and God knows that which is his. But in reality the nation was not in exile because of iniquity and sins but were righteous, as it says as the wicked should swallow the one more righteous than he, rather that this was what God willed and desired. But suffering and exile and death will come upon him [them, the nations] for they, as they will eventually admit, are also the ones that destroy him, "he bore the guilt for the many and made intercession for sinners," if so he damaged sinfully, meaning he was th because that the sins should plague him, and his is true from a few perspectives.