

The Suffering Servant of Isaiah

Q: What other OT passages suggest that the messiah must suffer?

A: Ps 22 is the other prophecy which speaks in uncanny detail regarding the suffering of an individual taken by NT writers to be Jesus. More cryptic allusions include Zech 13:7, Dan 9 (esp. 9:26), and the NRSV also points to Dan 12 and Hab 2 (??).

Q: How did the pre-Christian Jewish community identify the Servant?

A: Commentators will occasionally assert that prior to Jesus the Servant wasn't identified with the messiah, but recent research¹ shows good evidence that this interpretation wasn't unknown.

First, there were interpretations of the Servant as an individual, if not the Messiah: In Ecclesiasticus 49:10 (Sirach), written in Palestine in 180-190 BC, the Servant is identified as Elijah, who will return to “restore the tribes of Jacob” (quoting Isa 49:6). In the 1 Enoch 71:14-17, a 1st-cent.-AD Jewish composition, Enoch is described using the titles of the Servant.

In 2 Esdras 7:28-29 (a.k.a. 4 Ezra), we read prophecy of a dying Messiah. This figure isn't associated with the Servant, but nevertheless shows the idea of the Messiah's death wasn't unknown, if not widely anticipated.

On the other side, the Wisdom of Solomon, a Hellenistic Jewish writing from 100 BC-45 AD, employs a collective interpretation of the Servant and his suffering. The Qumran community similarly saw themselves as “occupying the role of the servant, and interpreted their suffering in this light.” This is supported by a passage in the Dead Sea Scrolls saying a life devoted to the covenant of the community could “atone for all those in Aaron who volunteer for holiness, and for those in Israel who belong to the truth, and for Gentile proselytes who join in community” (1QS 5:6) in order to “preserve the faith in the land with self-control and a broken spirit, atoning for sin by working justice and suffering afflictions” (1QS 8:3-4a; cf. 8:10; 9:4). The LXX Greek translation of the OT (2-3 c. BC) also supports a collective identification of the Servant.

The Aramaic Targum is perhaps the strongest support for a messianic interpretation. The servant is explicitly identified with the messiah in Isa 42:1; 43:10; 52:13; 53:10. Interestingly, though, the Targumist radically changed the Hebrew in making his translation, in order to attribute the suffering in the fourth Song to the Jewish nation, the temple, the Gentiles and the wicked in general—anybody but the messiah.

Rabbinic teaching can also yield clues regarding 1st-cent. thinking. The mid 2nd-cent. *Dialogue with Trypho* by Justin presents the Jewish debater as arguing on the basis of Isa 53 that the messiah must suffer, but objecting to the manner of Jesus' death. Justin presents this as a widely-held Jewish belief. The earliest indisputable firsthand evidence of a rabbinic interpretation of Isa 53 which takes the servant as the messiah, and attributes suffering to him is found in the Babylonian Talmud (c. 200 AD). In its discussion about the name of the messiah is the following statement: “‘The leper,’ those of the house of Rabbi said: ‘The sick one’ is his name; for it is written: ‘Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken with leprosy, smitten of God, and afflicted.’”

Also of interest from 1st c. AD is a Jewish wisdom book called 4 Maccabees, which presents an argument for reason over emotion, written in the context of the Maccabean revolution, using its martyrs as examples. In 4 Macc there are four remarkable passages that view the deaths of the martyrs as having atoning significance (4 Macc 1:11; 6:28-29; 17:21-22; 18:4). The third reads, “they having become, as it were, a ransom for the

¹ “The Suffering Servant Between the Testaments”, Sydney H. T. Page, *New Testament Studies*, **31**, 1985, pp. 481-497. See also, Larry R. Helyer, *Exploring Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period* (section on 4 Macc esp.).

sin of our nation. And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an atoning sacrifice, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been mistreated.” The best guess is that 4 Macc neither influenced or was influenced by the NT—though it is possible they both drew on a common source, such as the Servant Songs.

Conclusion: “It is unlikely that the concept of a messiah who would atone for sin through his suffering was developed in the intertestamental period, but there is good reason to think that some initial steps had been taken in that direction. It certainly is difficult to imagine that all segments of pre-Christian Judaism would have been unsympathetic to this idea.”² [Page]

² The *Jewish Study Bible* initially points out the collective theory for the identity of the Servant. It acknowledges that various passages appear to refer to an individual, and that the Targum identifies the Servant as the Messiah—but says this is unlikely because Deutero Isaiah doesn’t refer to the Messiah elsewhere, which it takes as an indication that Deutero Isaiah didn’t believe in an individual Messiah. (In other news, Othello isn’t black because there aren’t many other African characters in Shakespeare, so he clearly didn’t believe in them. Oh, and his corpus was written by at least three separate authors.) The JSB additionally acknowledges that Christians see the Servant as prophetic of Jesus, and adds only that “medieval rabbinic commentators devoted considerable attention to refuting this interpretation”—but fails to provide any of their arguments.