

Do The Messianic Prophecies of the Old Testament Point to Jesus or to Someone Else?—Part 4

Dr. John Ankerberg, Dr. Walter Kaiser, Dr. Pinchas Lapidé

Dr. John Ankerberg: We are talking with two scholars—one representing Orthodox Judaism, and another one representing Orthodox Christianity—on the topic: Is there evidence in the Hebrew Scriptures concerning the Messiah that either points to Jesus or is it somebody else? What is that evidence?

Dr. Kaiser, I'm going to start with you again this week in terms of you've got to set the case, because you're saying that the Hebrew Scriptures of Dr. Lapidé are saying there is evidence that points to a specific person and that is fulfilled in Jesus. All right, if that's so, then outline it for us, please, and let's stick to Isaiah 53 or in that area.

Dr. Walter Kaiser: Yes, I think Isaiah 53 is the central passage in this whole discussion, for the great question is the identity of the Servant of the Lord. The Servant is probably, if I had to rename the doctrine of the Messiah, I think it would be more appropriately named "The Servant of the Lord," than "The Messiah", because there are 20 references between Isaiah 42 and 53 to the Servant of the Lord and then 11 more in which it's plural, "Servants of the Lord." Again, we have that similar phenomenon we were talking about on another broadcast about the "many" and the "one." For all Israel is the servant. All Israel has suffered, that's clear.

But yet, there the servant has a ministry to Israel. It's interesting, Isaiah 53:8 says that "By oppression and judgment, the servant was taken away—actually is "snatched" away—and who can speak of his seed, his descendants, for he was cut off from the land of the living. For the transgression of my people, he was stricken."

"My people"—identity. Who are the "my people"? I think it's Israel. So, if the "servant" is Israel, how can the servant minister to the servant, or to "my people"? No, the servant here is portrayed as an individual through this whole passage. It is speaking about what *He* has done; how *He* was despised; how *He* was rejected. And yet it was on behalf of "my people."

The mystery of the Servant actually begins in the preceding chapter. In Chapter 52 where you have verses 13, 14 and 15, he tells us before we begin this very, very difficult passage, "My servant will have success." He is going to win. But then he makes a comparison in the next two verses, Isaiah 52:14,15. Just as many as were startled when they saw Him the first time, a man who was so beat up, so mocked, so badly treated that we turned away from Him. He looked awful. Yet, "Just as many," says the next verse—there's a comparison—"just as many as this, just so, kings when they see Him will say", in effect, if I could give my own translation or paraphrase, "Well, shut my mouth!" The kings will say, "This is beyond understanding. For now He comes in all of His royalty."

The very problem we've been discussing, about the First Coming and Second Coming. I see verse 14—First Coming: He is smitten, He is bruised, He is beaten, yet He *startles!* Kings, even, are going to say, "This is amazing!" And then we go on to speak of His rejection and then at the heart of this, His atonement—"All we, *all we*," confesses Israel—and I think the Gentile community has got to identify there too, as well: "All of us like sheep—there's the herd instinct—have gone astray. Each one of us—there's the individual responsibility—is turned to his own way. And the Lord hath laid on Him—that is, the suffering Servant—the iniquity of us all." This sounds like Yom Kippur. It sounds like the very thing in Leviticus 16. Yet it is the Servant of the Lord who is so identified with Israel.

But it doesn't end there. This chapter ends in the last three verses with a fantastic statement of hope for it changes gears suddenly, and in the last few verses it turns around and it says that there is satisfaction here: "He will see his seed and prolong his days, and the plan of God will prosper." So don't bite your fingernails. This thing will come out okay.

And I think, if I understand this, though the word is not used, that's right; but He says He is going to give Him a portion among the great ones. He'll divide the spoil of the strong. This same one who is smitten is coming back victorious. I don't mind saying that I think this amounts to a case for the resurrection from the dead. I think that's the only way I can explain it. How someone who is "cut off," who is dead for His people, and He was assigned a grave with the wicked and yet with the rich, and I wonder, how can they pull that off? And yet, I do think that Jeshua, Jesus of Nazareth, there hung with thieves, and yet put into the grave with the rich. The text couldn't have been more precise there at that point. It is calling the details in the life of Jesus right to the money. And this, 800 years before it took place.

Ankerberg: Dr. Lapidé?

Dr. Pinchas Lapidé: I fully agree with Kaiser that Isaiah 53 lends itself in many startling similarities to the life, career and death of Jesus of Nazareth, with the exception, perhaps, of verse 10 which you quoted where it says that "He—that Servant—will prolong his days and see his seed," which means in Hebrew, which is terribly poetic, "He will live to be at least 70 and He will see His grandchildren," in proper English. Neither, unfortunately, Jesus lived to see. With the exception of verse 10, everything else could fit.

But I must tell you that in Judaism long before Jesus, there have been five different interpretations of this chapter: One, autobiographical. The prophet speaks of himself with Oriental hyperbole. He never died—Isaiah—that way, but he suffered very much, because prophecy in Israel was the most unrewarding business I could possibly think of....

Kaiser: Non-"prophet." It was "non-prophet."

Lapidé: Non-prophet at all. Non-profit...I would say, worse than that. It took a great deal of punishment and so on, and Isaiah speaks of that. Jeremiah says, "I am like a sheep led to the slaughter," and everybody knows he wasn't a sheep nor led to the slaughter, but he speaks of himself and his sufferings.

Anyway, the most important thing is that the autobiographical interpretation of Isaiah 53 was prevalent as we learn from Acts 8. Because the eunuch of Ethiopia, on the way back, who had come to Jerusalem to worship—in other words, that guy wasn't the Ethiopian anymore; he must have been a convert or a semi-convert—reads on the way back home Isaiah 53. Well, that's no heathen who reads that kind of things on the way. And he meets Philip the Apostle and the first question he asks him... Listen to the question: "Tell me, of whom does the Prophet speak? Of himself, or of somebody else?" What does he get that from? He must have gotten in from

Jerusalem, from the rabbis. The “of himself” was the first interpretation.

The second one is Israel collectively. This tiny, little, weak people has been suffering for the rest of mankind and the interpretation of the rabbis long before Jesus, and many after Auschwitz as well, say Israel is the expiatory lamb for mankind. God visits Israel’s sin with all the full impact upon that wee little people in order to let mankind, guilty mankind, survive. That’s another possibility.

Ankerberg: Which is the one that you choose?

Lapide: I’ll tell you frankly, I cannot make up my mind, because I am quite sure that the Apostles on Easter Sunday undoubtedly meant that passage in the earliest witness we have of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, we all know it, where Paul says, “I just tell you what the others told me,” and that’s the only piece where Paul writes bad Greek and is therefore the more credible, because nobody writes perfect Greek.

Ankerberg: Okay. Dr. Kaiser?

Kaiser: I think we’re close. I think we’re very close. But there’s one problem with making even the prophet or Israel... I can’t tell you how horrified I am by Auschwitz. I think it is one of the greatest blights on history, there’s no doubt about it. But there is one problem in this text, verse 9 and verse 10 are very important. In verse 9 he says here that this suffering Servant has done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth. Now, I know that’s not Isaiah’s view of himself or his people; or of me, I must say as well.

Lapide: Correct.

Kaiser: And, it seems to me, as a matter of fact, I had made a note in Isaiah 29:13 where he says, “Israel has dishonored the living God with their mouths.” So, I know I have him already on record, and if indeed Isaiah is to be that suffering servant, or if Israel is to be that suffering servant, then I think they strike out on verse 9. And the other thing is that He gives his life as an “*asham*,” verse 10, as a “guilt-offering” a “trespass-offering.” And if you’re going to give your life as a trespass-offering, one thing for sure, if I know anything about the Old Testament—and I’m still learning an awful lot about the *Tenach*—but it must be a lamb without blemish. It must be perfect. And the life that’s given here must be a perfect life. So I’ll need Isaiah to be perfect; I’ll need Israel to be perfect; I’ll need the people in Auschwitz to be perfect, if they are going to be that substitutionary lamb. That’s the only requirement that I have.

Ankerberg: Okay. Dr. Lapide, you’d like to respond to what Walter just said there.

Lapide: Well, I’ve discovered something interesting. Isaiah 53 in its totality, every little word group has been used by the four evangelists in their passion narratives. It’s incredible! They haven’t missed a single group of three or four words. In other words, it seems that either Jesus Himself, which is very likely, or at least the Evangelists later and primitive Christianity in between, were convinced that He died on the cross as the suffering Servant of God.

We know that nowhere in Isaiah 53 the word “Messiah” is used. The word “Servant,” undoubtedly. It seems to me that Jesus thought that He had to suffer for His guilty brethren—and guilty are we all—in order to (I use the term with a caution), that they should “deserve” the Kingdom of God, which God has not yet sent them. But by offering Himself to die the most cruel death imaginable at that time, He will by His unblemished self-sacrifice motivate God to give Israel the Kingdom of Heaven. That is very, very likely, if I have an inkling of the mentality of this Jew called Jesus.

On the other hand, the Christian Church in the Second Century, and later, monopolized

Isaiah 53 to the very point that the synagogue, beginning from the Third Century, kept this portion *out* of their annual cycle of readings, although it was the most popular of all prophetic readings. I think we both did wrong! You by monopolizing and we by excising! Because I do not think fundamentally, going down to the very depth of thought, there is a necessary divergence between the three main interpretations.

If Isaiah spoke of himself, and he suffered very much for being blunt and sincere in imparting God's message to his own co-religionists. If we think of Israel, which certainly is not unblemished—no prophet ever said that—but which suffered probably more than any other nation under the sun, and then Jesus did the same as a sort of microcosm of all of Israel, then ultimately the message of all three interpretations means that God welcomes the selfless sacrifice of luminaries unique in their generation, and is prepared for that self-same sacrifice to bestow forgiveness to a nation, a generation, a people, or a band of believers, and that unites the three interpretations, so I don't want that "either/or" business the Greeks are in love of. I'd rather prefer the one and the other as *both* possibilities of the ultimate meaning of this crucial chapter.

Kaiser: But Dr. Lapidé, when we've got our lives on the line here...this is like going to a doctor and saying, "Well, now, you have done an examination on me on cancer." And he says, "Well, there are three readings. Let's keep all three." And I say, "Well, it's a little risky. It's my life. I would like to know more precisely."

And when we get to talking about the whole problem of—which was the great concern, I think, of the Torah and of the Prophets—it was the question of, "How do we get rid of the guilt and get rid of the sin question?" This was one of the dominating themes here. The whole sacrificial system was provided. In poetry, yes, it is a picture, but it is a picture for what? And where do we get the conclusion, the reality, the concrete?

Hebrew, if it's anything, is not abstract. It's very concrete. It's located in reality. And the reality here, it seems to me, is that Isaiah 53 is trying to say, "Look, there is a Person who will be that *"kippar,"* who will be that One who ransoms and delivers by a substitute. And, our only question, it seems to me, is the identity: Who, then, is that person? Will the Servant of the Lord, who makes the perfect guilt offering, please sign in? Or please stand up?

And in the fullness of time, here comes the Jew, Jesus, who marches into history and not with flamboyance, but as Isaiah 42 says, without making a big fuss, and yet ministering, healing the sick, and helping those who are blind, giving them sight and proclaiming the day of the Lord.

The package begins to fit, if we use a pragmatic test for truth. There's a lot here that begins to start fitting. And therefore, I'm impressed by that. I think it's my culture, I think it's Western mentality that teaches me that there is.... In the Hegelian pattern, you don't need to be dialectic—"yes" or "no," "true" or "false." You can make a synthesis, a kind of gray, in between, and I think that's German thought, with all due respect to the Great Hegel.

Lapidé: Let me show you how un-German this idea is. At the Sinai self-revelation of God, the central "faith experience" of Judaism, it says that the voice of God spoke to the people and then come the Ten Commandments. Then comes the awkward sentence, "And the people heard the *voices* and trembled." And the rabbis ponder upon the plural of "voices" when five lines before it only spoke of "the voice of God."

The result, some five centuries before Jesus, was the following: God spoke with one single voice, but each one of the 600,000 Israelites standing at the foot of the mountain heard God's voice in his own inimitable individuality with the kind of ears, eyes and brain God had given to him and nobody else. And he therefore got 600,000 different hearings, understandings and

exegesis of the one single voice of God.

And I have a suspicion *you* got one interpretation, because your ears and mine are different, and they ought to be, because God doesn't produce mass-production. Every bearer of His image is totally unique and inimitable. And therefore your reading of Isaiah 53 and my reading of Isaiah 53 are both reflections or refractions of the divine light.

I don't believe in "either/or" at all. I do believe in the multiplicity of interpretation, and I'll tell you why. Because botany, zoology, astronomy, biology and all these are books of God just like our Bible. No one basic law. The endless and inexhaustible multiplicity and variety, because no two fishes in a pond are the same. Siamese twins are anatomically different. Why on earth should in theology, of all places, Prussian uniformism prevail if it doesn't in all other books of God?

Kaiser: I can give you one "book of God," and that would be a chemistry periodical chart. If I go into the chem lab and say, "Well, I'll tell you what speaks to me: a little of this and a little of that." I may have truth manifested to me in a tremendous way...with a great explosion there. I can't violate the basic laws of the universe and say, "Yeah, but that's what I get out of it. That's what turns me on. That's what's my bag."

Lapide: I'll answer that, Mr. Kaiser. It's a good point you made. My revered teacher, Martin Buber, used to say, "In sciences, a clear, right, correct statement is the opposite of a false statement." In theology, one clear truth might be the opposite of another clear truth. And there is no "right" and "false" easily discernible to our small, human brain. Truths might complement each other, although at first blush, they seem to contradict each other.

Kaiser: Dr. Lapide, would you say that is true of the mind of God, though? I have lots of doubts about *my* interpretation. I suspect my interpretation a lot. I suspect as much my colleagues' interpretations. But, I really wonder whether God says, "Well, take it on an average. I'll take the best ten interpretations." I don't think that was what He was about. If there is such a thing as a living God, and if He is Truth in and of Himself, I would think He does hold us accountable in theology just as much as He holds the chemist accountable to the basic periodic chart. And that's Ground Zero for me.

Lapide: Well, let me say this. If we are frank, Dr. Kaiser, what we both know of God goes easily on a postcard, with space enough left for three stamps.

Kaiser: No, it goes on 66 books.

Lapide: No, no. That's a different knowledge. I would distinguish between what we know *of* God and what we know *about* God. What we know *of* God is rationally, scientifically provable, and that's nil as far as God is concerned, because He remains the inscrutable and unfathomable. What we know *about* God, from secondary and third sources, to wit our Holy Scripture, our ancestors—yours and mine—and far be it to belittle these things, that fills all the books of the Bible.

But I do think we should be able to interpret them, and I do think we should stick to the multiplicity of possibilities of interpretation without proclaiming one single truth. Because truth in human history has been the most murderous vocable in the treasury of human language. In the name of Truth, or supposed Truth, more people have killed each other than for any other word.

So, let's be very careful in the use of that word "truth" and let us suggest that we both partake in Truth and "partake" comes from the word "part." I have a suspicion that Divine Truth is far too big for you and me and some others to monopolize it. We have a little tidbit of it which is truth. But, by God, not all of it!

Kaiser: I couldn't agree more. I think that Paul said, "We know in pieces and we prophesy—we preach—in pieces." But our question is simply this: Why then does Jeremiah say, "I received this word, and it was within me as a burning fire..." And he said, "When I said, 'I'll keep quiet'—I'm not going to say anymore of this. It's not a popular thing. I don't like it! It's not my idea! It is God's idea, he said, "The thing was within me like a burning fire. I *had* to speak it." But he said, "I know the difference between what I would like to say and what this revelatory word is."

He makes a clear distinction there, and that's the claim that I hear. I must hear the claim of these men, first of all. It's the old proverb: A tree has fallen in the forest. Did it make a sound? Or didn't it make a sound, if no one was there? This is a great philosophical conundrum. And some say, "Well, if no one was there to hear it, it probably didn't make a sound." Others say, "Oh, yes, trees falling always make a sound."

My answer to the conundrum is, "The prophets were there. They heard the tree fall." And they said, "We can only prophesy and teach concerning what we have heard. We've got to! We've got to give this message out." And I, too, with you, I think an awful lot of crimes have been committed in the name of Truth, and I sincerely regret that. I trust I never fall into that same spectrum.