

February-March, 2008

#1 “Who are People Saying the Son of Man Is?”

Ed Kalish

Read from Matthew 16:13-20

What about you, Israel of 2008? Who do you say that the Son of Man is? How are you going to deal with this Person? Who is this ‘Yeshua of Nazareth’, this ‘Jesus Christ’? Will you simply dismiss him as some quirky historical figure? Will you accept the rabbinical interpretation that He was an impostor, or a madman, or some individual who took it upon Himself to assert His own divinity? Will you maintain against all logic and scholarship that He was perhaps not even a historical figure at all, but simply the construct of some opportunistic zealots of an earlier era all of whom suffered from a messianic complex, and so created for themselves a fictitious figure they proceeded to vigorously promote?

Or will you accept His existence only on some selective level, in other words, assert that only certain portions of the narrative of His life are true, and the rest is fiction? If this is your approach, how will you pick and choose? Will you decide on the basis of 21st century presumption that every element of a supernatural nature must be dismissed as impossible? But can you be so sure that God is not entirely capable of working beyond His own created laws, if He so chooses, in order to assert Himself in some unique way in history? And if you rationalize away the supernatural aspects of this extraordinary first century Life, what do you do with the host of stories that are foundational to our history as Jews? What of Sarah’s conception of Isaac by Abraham, long after each of them was biologically capable of producing children? Was it pure coincidence that Joseph, the son of Jacob, wound up an official in Egypt, in spite of his brothers’ efforts to do away with him, and thus provided deliverance for our ancestors from inevitable starvation in a time of famine? Was Moses mentally disturbed, to imagine that he had some sort of encounter with the Living God at a burning bush in the midst of the desert? What of the miraculous deliverance of Israel from the iron-fisted control of the Egyptian Pharaoh, by means of great plagues and signs? And on it goes, and goes... way too many multiplied instances from the Biblical accounts to even begin to mention in a short segment like this one.

So if you find the extraordinary, supernatural, and inexplicable aspects of the life of ‘Yeshua the Messiah’ (Jesus Christ) unacceptable and improbable and far-fetched, you must on some level dismiss the possibility that God is capable of doing anything that exceeds what we as men will permit Him to do according to the laws of logic and science. But if you insist on thus restricting the power of God, you have made yourself His arbiter, and what is the point of believing in the possibility of His existence at all, if you reduce Him to a mere construct of man?

Now let us examine an intensely uncomfortable aspect of the life of this Man, something that most of us neither like to talk about or even consider, because the implications are extremely disturbing, and penetrate to the core of our beings. What sort of a Messiah is it that allows Himself to be nailed on a Roman Cross? This is a hero? This is a deliverer? This is the embodiment of all that Israel has ever longed for, the consummation of thousands of years of our history, that for which we've waited, and and hoped, and prayed?

And He has the hubris, the effrontery, to personally insult me by suggesting that His death is a sacrificial death on behalf of my sins? This places me in a miserably vulnerable and humiliating position by first suggesting that I *have* sins, that my sins are of such an egregious and dreadful nature that there is no other way to deal with them other than by someone dying for them, and furthermore, that the issue of how to deal with them cannot be handled by me, but must be dealt with by someone else. How could I be so utterly besmirched with guilt and culpability that such a thing could be true? 'Besides, I'm not such a bad fellow [I realize I'm being a bit facetious in my manner and line of argument, here, but I am trying to bring out an extremely important point]. I've lived my life doing good works, and being a pretty good guy; I've worked to advance many social causes, and at least I've kept out of prison, and you won't see my name in the list of court cases published in any newspaper!'

But yes, dear friends, this Messiah, when He is attempting to deal with me personally, insists that it's my sins He died for.

Well, I reply, this is an absurd proposition. Can sins, per se, and my sins in particular, really constitute such a gross offense to God that they have to be dealt with by such a draconian measure? But is it in fact possible, I ask you in all seriousness, that the existence of the sin of humankind is the one thing that constitutes such a gross offense to the inherent nature of this universe, created as it was by a transcendent God of an absolutely impeccable and holy nature, that it must be confronted and eliminated in such a dreadful and remarkable manner?

Perhaps you have a hard time accepting such an assertion.

What then is meant by the following severe and incriminating words that are a part of Holy Writ? Are they just someone's judgmental ramblings, the product of a self-righteous, holier-than-thou mind, inserted arbitrarily in the Bible as if they were the words of God Himself? Or, God help us, are they true? Quoting from the 'Tanakh', from the Psalms and the prophet Isaiah:

*There is no one righteous, not even one!
No one understands,
no one seeks God, all have turned away
and at the same time become useless;
there is no one who shows kindness, not a single one!!*

*Their throats are open graves,
they use their tongues to deceive.
Vipers' venom is under their lips.
Their mouths are full of curses and bitterness.
Their feet rush to shed blood, (cont.)
in their ways are ruin and misery,
and the way of shalom they do not know.*

There is no fear of God before their eyes.

These and a host of questions like them invariably rise to the surface, do they not, whenever we confront the extraordinary figure of the Man who should otherwise be just another simple peasant from the countryside of Galilee, who lived during a far-off, obscure era of time that is thankfully greatly removed from the modern, technologically superior, infinitely more advanced age in which we live today. Right? But why does His life always provoke this kind of incredible uproar and controversy? Why can we not just leave Him alone and forget about Him?

Friends, let me quote again the words of this marvelous Man, this Jew of Jews, a question He posed to His disciples so many, many years ago, for it must be asked again of each ensuing generation, of every people and race, and of every single individual, just as it is posed to you, the listener, now:

Reread Matt. 16:13-15

Who do you, dear listener, say that this Man is?

#2: "He Was Wounded For Our Transgressions"

Ed Kalish

Read Isaiah 53:1-9

What do these incredible, mysterious words mean, written in the 8th century BC? Of whom do they speak? What sort of unbelievably humiliating position could a person have placed himself in to have brought upon himself such terrible consequences?

Notice that this tender, emotional passage is sandwiched with equal mystery between two texts of this marvelous prophet which depict an absolutely opposite theme: one of the high and glorious exaltation of Jerusalem in chapter 52, and of rapturous, millennial fulfillment in chapter 54.

Listen, for instance, to the opening verses of chapter 52: *Read vs. 1-3*

And listen again, briefly, to portions of chapter 54 which establishes the other perimeter of the text we are discussing today: *Read vs. 1-3.*

And now turn again to the central chapter of this trio of passages: a bizarre, anomalous insertion, like some dimly dark valley that intervenes between two bright, snow-clad peaks! *Read portions of 53:1-9 again.*

We consider again the question of the individual being described, the nature of his apparent predicament, and the reasons he might have wound up in such a place. There are two obvious but very contrary conclusions we might draw. He might either consummately deserve the fate he is apparently suffering---perhaps these are the just deserts of an evil life, that of a malefactor, and apparently one of such magnitude that his punishment is especially severe and degrading. But there is another possible reason, although it appears utterly improbable, because the idea is so monstrous: that the miserably low position this Individual has been placed in has nothing to do with His own misdeeds, but is the result of the undeserved malice of those who surround Him. In other words, He has been unjustly and unfairly consigned to a fate that is not only out of proportion to any misdeed committed, but is not related in any way to actions deserving of punishment.

The text doesn't at all allow for the former explanation, that of culpability, for the innocence of this Victim is proclaimed almost immediately. In fact, further in the chapter, the subject is pictured as a "lamb to the slaughter", the very picture of a death whose nature is absolutely out of proportion to that of the One dying.

He is despised and rejected of men. Why? What has He done? We don't generally despise individuals unless they have somehow merited it, do we? Ah, but how often is such an obvious code of behavior violated?! And besides, who determines whether one person or group of persons somehow "merit" hatred? How many of us have seen the handicapped, the deformed, the retarded, the ugly and unattractive, the subject of disapprobation, even our own. We say that children are sometimes quick to be cruel with no justification, as one child is picked on or bullied by other children, much in the same way that a flock of chickens pecks some poor, unfortunate bedraggled bird among them to death. But do not we adults more times than we admit find these emotions rising in ourselves toward others, without any real provocation?

Have you ever been subject to the hatred of your peers? How biting, how frustrating and annoying is hatred based for instance upon race or ethnicity, as many of us know. But the question that really defies us is: why is it that this kind of fierce, uncontrolled impulse is resident, it seems, even in the best and noblest of breasts? Is it possible that there are none of us who are exempt from at least the potential of such behavior, or have we not had occasion yet to see honestly the very depths of our hearts?

'But,' you respond, 'one might justly aim invective at another who deserves it: a tyrant, an abusive individual, an arch-criminal, or some cruel, loveless person who has

devoted his life to the destruction of others.’ Yes, yes, I suppose so, though as civilized folk we learn to curb the extent of our expressions of negativity, and look for other, effective and measured ways to make sure, if we can, that justice is served against such individuals.

But returning to the Figure under discussion: we still cannot understand why He suffers so, and is the subject of such opprobrium. The text offers clues which are at once profoundly disturbing and induce great uneasiness, if we choose to place ourselves among those included in the collective pronouns “we” and “our” that reappear throughout the chapter. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...he was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities. Now his torments are represented not only as unmerited, but as somehow caused by...*us*.

The questions provoked by these phrases seem to defy a ready answer. How is it possible for any other person to perform such a function for me? Certainly another individual might choose to lighten or remove a physical load I was bearing. Or another might, through words of sympathy, and through expressions of love, actually alleviate an inner weight from my heart that I might otherwise have had to bear alone. We all recognize the virtue of empathizing wholeheartedly with others in their suffering. But how can another actually...practically... take up my sorrows and infirmities. And even more improbably, how can anyone else be *wounded for my transgressions and crushed for my iniquities*?

As the profoundly unsettling implications of this passage appear to be multiplied, another enigma, the weightiest of all, is expressed in the clearest of terms: all of this is in fact the work of God Himself! ...*and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all*. The Agency that has created such an incongruous scenario is none other than God Himself, that supposed Author of Order, Harmony, and Righteousness, who alone is truly good. But how, in a thousand, thousand eons of time; through multiplied posited universes; if every mind of every age could work its imagination endlessly; could we ever equate the character of God as we understand it, with such a dread, chaotic, wretched circumstance.

The answer, friends, is found in an event in Jewish history that occurred several centuries later, when a certain Man on a certain Day in a certain place was nailed to a Roman Cross, having been abandoned by His friends, abandoned by His hordes of followers, condemned and abused by the religious authorities, taken with grim, calculating cruelty into custody by Roman soldiers, stripped of His clothing, whipped, and condemned to death. The record of this occasion was compiled scrupulously by four separate sources whose written accounts relied heavily on eyewitnesses.

How can the connection between these two texts, that of Isaiah and those of the Gospel writers, with further explanations found in the apostolic books, be so utterly consonant. Are they not describing one and the same Individual, Yeshua the Messiah, Jesus Christ?

I close by only asking you to allow yourselves to ponder these questions, for I say with every fiber of my being that these matters are not peripheral, but constitute realities that ultimately will affect every single human existence.

#3: “The Blood of the Covenant”

Ed Kalish

Read Exodus 24:1-8

Why is this issue of blood so central to Biblical themes? The subject is at the same time both fascinating and repugnant. But the Bible is full of the subject of blood, from one end to the other. We associate it somehow with the presence of sin. No blood was shed at all in the pristine Garden of Man’s beginning until God Himself provided animal skins to cover Adam and Eve, after their fall from grace. That blood sacrifices were soon afterward offered to God is evidenced in Abel’s oblation of the firstlings of his flock, an offering which God favorably received. Ironically, human blood was first spilled in violence very shortly afterward in the tragic tale of jealous Cain’s murder of his brother Abel, following God’s rejection of Cain’s offering of crops. From then on, blood flowed freely and in great measure, human blood shed in conflict and warfare and enmity, until the earth was covered with it. Following the judgment of the great Flood, blood sacrifice was renewed as Noah gave thanks to God for safe deliverance. Similar offerings must have been practiced right down to the time of the patriarch Abraham, who is recorded as offering animal sacrifices on numerous occasions as acts of worship. By so doing, Abraham gave thanks to the God who had separated him from his kindred, led him to the Promised Land, and conferred upon him promises of great magnitude that have never been made to any other. We see these same acts of worship at numerous other altars involving the descendants of Abraham.

And the red stains of sacrifice increase a hundredfold as we follow Moses and the children of Israel into their covenant relationship with God. While yet in Egypt, the people were required in the first Passover to mark their doorways with the blood of lambs, to avert destruction by the Angel of death. Following the giving of the Law on Sinai, the covenant was sealed, as we have seen, by Moses’ initial sacrifice, and was renewed constantly thereafter by ongoing sacrifices as prescribed for the wilderness tabernacle. We see Aaron and his sons, bedecked in their gorgeous priestly robes, subject to a sprinkling of blood as they were consecrated by Moses for service before the community of Israel. And we read solemn texts which remind us of the import of these things:

And whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among you, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul. (Lev. 17:10-11)

One of these phrases bears repeating again, for it is of utmost importance to the theme of this message: *For the life of the flesh is in the blood and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.*

When Israel first entered the Promised Land under Joshua, the people at once offered sacrifice in thanksgiving to God, as the covenant with Him was again confirmed at this critical point in the history of the nation. Even during the bleak time of the Judges, righteous and godly individuals continued this practice. Under the great Israeli monarchies that ensued, we can picture the magnificent Temple of Solomon, an edifice without equal either before or after its construction, filled with crowds of worshipers on the High Holy Days. And in front of the congregation we see a nearly endless stream of sacrificial animals being led to the slaughter at the altar, the blood flowing in virtual rivulets across the tiled floor as hundreds of prescribed offerings are made.

The sight of the red-stained temple floor and the odor of carnage; the blood-bespattered priests who ministered, upon it; the parade of helpless animals being led in procession to the altar, their throats methodically cut with calculating determination as part of a prescribed order of worship; the strange, uncomfortable incongruity of this oft-repeated scene, all served as a grim reminder to the people of the cost of human sin. Were there no sin, there would be no need for shed blood. Somehow, the culpability for all of it descended upon each witnessing heart with nearly unbearable weight. Yet with equal mystery, those present found a measure of inexplicable deliverance in these acts of seemingly brutal sacrifice, understanding that the victim being offered in some ineffable way was literally taking the place of those for whom the offerings were presented. The loss of the life of each animal served to pay the price that the worshiper himself would otherwise be obligated to pay. This was God's way of demonstrating His gracious intention to provide a means for sinful humankind to deal with its most grievous issue...its sin.

This bloody scene is repeated in all its paradoxical unseemliness right on down through the nation's history until, at the destruction of the Temple, it became no longer possible to offer sacrifice at the prescribed location under the appropriate circumstances. With bitter irony, the ability of our forbears to offer sacrifice was curtailed finally and unequivocally in a bloodbath of unprecedented proportions, when the Roman legions invaded Jerusalem, slaughtered its inhabitants, and destroyed both city and Temple, but not before they had offered a pig in mock oblation at the sacred altar!

No more blood sacrifice?! Where now is the atonement? By what means can we achieve righteous standing with God? How can we still this pernicious voice of conscience that insists continually that we do need some means of safely approaching God, and that we cannot appear without blood? Am I correct to say that this event left a great vacant place in the collective heart of the Jewish people, a place which cannot be successfully filled by any enormous multiplication of surrogate means, whether it be the slaughter of a chicken, or the recitation of the Law, or a host of mitzvahs, or social ac-

tion on a thousand contemporary fronts, or cultural and artistic involvement, or even our own self-punishment and self-affliction, as if we could somehow atone for ourselves?

For the life of the flesh is in the blood and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.

It is of greatest significance that this issue of blood also occupies a place of utmost centrality in another faith, that which is called “Christian”, which I would labor with all of my heart to demonstrate to you is not in fact “another faith” at all, but the self same one maintained by our ancestors who shed the blood of innocent animal victims to atone for human sin.

We can see a typological representation of what I’m about to discuss with you in the ancient story of Abraham’s offering of his son Isaac in Genesis 22. This offering, had it occurred, would have been the only human sacrifice instituted by God Himself. Abraham, of course, was undergoing a supreme test: would he be willing in trusting obedience to yield to God the one element in his life that was infinitely precious: his heir, and the one through whom the entire scope of God’s promises to Abraham and his descendants would be realized. Abraham was stopped by an angel, as we know, in the nick of time, as he raised his knife over his supine son, and God Himself provided an animal sacrifice instead. Abraham named the location “The Lord Will Provide”... in other words, the Lord will provide the sacrifice that He Himself requires. These words have utmost significance regarding a consummate sacrifice that Israel was yet to witness.

The history of God’s relationship to His chosen people is one of deep, unqualified commitment on God’s part, at all costs, really, to Himself. Note these poignant verses from the prophet Isaiah: *Read 63:1-9.*

Think again on those words that speak of the Lord’s unutterable condescension in stooping to serve the needs of His headstrong, errant covenant people: *Reread vs. 8-9.* And then turn back several chapters to that remarkable passage we discussed in my previous message: chapter 53, which speaks of a mysterious Figure who literally presents Himself as a sin-offering for the iniquity of the people, an offering that was unto the death: *Read 53:7-9, 12.* Who, then, was this One who possessed the capacity to atone for the sins of others? Combine this portion of Scripture, if you will, with others, such as chapter 9:6-7:

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever.

Surely, bit by bit, scripture by scripture, we are assembling piece by piece the portrait of a certain Man with a certain Name who appeared at a certain time and a certain place in Israel for a very certain purpose that avails not only on Israel’s behalf, but

that of all men, a puzzle which finally resolves itself in the most concrete and wonderful of manners in the Person of Yeshua the Messiah, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the Son of God!

To this final, ultimate, all-sufficient Blood Sacrifice, we now realize, every single previous sacrifice was pointing. Herein is the presentation of blood that serves to fill that very palpable void left by the Temple's destruction. Because the blood was offered by a perfect, sinless Man... that One who alone can appropriately pay with His own blood for the collective sins of humankind because He Himself became a Man... it is infinitely superior to that of any animal sacrifice.

Does it humble us as modern and enlightened thinkers, who may well imagine that such notions are primitive and noxious, the preoccupations of ancient peoples and their bloodthirsty deities, that we are in such desperate straits that the holy, righteous blood of the Son of God yet remains the only acceptable payment for our sins? Can we concede that God is yet as utterly remote and inaccessible as ever to sin-laden mankind, who can never by any means imaginable contrive for himself a way of reaching that holy God? Yes, we should be humbled, and we should be overcome with wonder and awe at the grace and love that have so generously provided for us, as God provided for Abraham, a sacrifice not of our own making. And this Blood can be appropriated everywhere and anywhere by faith---it needn't be sought in a Temple which can no longer provide it.

Our deliverance, that of each and every one of us, is accomplished by our acknowledgment of these facts, and our submission to them!

February-March, 2008

#4: "Messiah"

Ed Kalish

What or who is this figure called "Messiah"? Some of us know him as a nameless individual who somehow haunts our entire cultural identity as Jews. In observant homes, an empty seat at the Passover is left for his arrival, and biblical texts promising his advent at some future point in Jewish history are quoted. He is alluded to in the Dead Sea scrolls, and is a theme among the cabalists. We read of certain ultra-orthodox sects who have identified this or that teacher as the promised one. Or we review the painful accounts of certain individuals who have appeared in our history to claim their messiahship, or whose followers have asserted it, only to suffer grim, violent deaths, as with the Bar Kochba rebellion of the second century. For many in our times the concept of "messiah" has morphed into a synonym for social action: the ancient idea of a personal messiah is abandoned, and reinterpreted as a metaphor for collective betterment---laboring for the good of humanity toward the ultimate elimination of all evil, and war, and selfish gain. Such hopes have led many Jews to embrace great, sweeping

ideologies, only to find that these “-isms” have ultimately yielded the exact opposite of what we had sought for in them. Our idealism was turned to ashes when tyranny, slavery, and oppression proved to be the reality underlying all of the rhetoric of altruism which had attracted us. But for others among us, there yet remains an irrepressible longing for the arrival of a masterful Figure who will be the embodiment of all that we admire, and cherish, and idealize in humankind, an Individual who will by some great demonstration of power and rectitude deliver humanity from all its woes into a kingdom of peace and righteousness. The same sentiments also abound in the world at large, as seen by the proliferation of super-heros, those fictional constructs imbued with extraordinary powers which can do little more than tantalize the imagination, suggesting that such desires are universal. Are these lingering expectations of a Deliver, one who by some consummate means will assert universal justice and peace, merely empty sentimentality, or are they really indicators of some profound, visceral, but as yet unmet need resident within every breast?

The place of Messiah in our history as Jews has been kept before our faces by and through the pages of Holy Scripture. The promise of a Coming One was introduced to the collective consciousness of mankind at its earliest stage in Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve were about to be driven by God from their idyllic state following their fall. The future arrival of a Deliverer is implied in God’s words to the Serpent who had beguiled them. Some day, somewhere, the “woman’s seed”, a special descendant of Eve, would appear to “bruise the head” of the Serpent, destroying him and ultimately allowing the banished pair to reclaim their fellowship with God. Hints of this yet unnamed Person continue to appear with increasing frequency throughout the span of the sacred text. We are enabled to assemble, piece by piece, what will eventually become the finished portrait of a certain individual of a particular time and place and people.

At first, we can only see this Figure as if through the wrong end of a telescope, a vague and distant and featureless face. The pagan prophet Balaam caught such a glimpse, apparently, as seen in his discourses to the Moabite king Balak, who had hired him to curse Israel as they awaited passage into the Promised Land:

I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; A Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult. (Nu. 24:17)

To whom do such mysterious words apply? Moses? David? One of the Prophets? Or a yet anonymous messianic deliverer?

Perhaps it is Moses. After all, he towers in stature and significance in our early history as a nation over every competing personality. But even Moses himself directs us beyond his own place in our past to another leader of apparently equal significance who will supersede him:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me in your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear. (Deut. 18:15).

And the Lord Himself is quoted shortly thereafter:

I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command. And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him. (vs. 18-19)

This phrase: *a prophet like me* is of tremendous significance. It has been stated twice. What does it imply? Consider the virtues of this man, Moses: his authority and courage, his intimacy with God, and his capacity for leadership. His position is absolutely unique: he has been divinely elected to bring an entire people into a covenant relationship with the God of the universe. The Pentateuchal accounts allow us to view in entirety the implication of such a calling for this man: the agonies and ecstasies, the successes and abject failures, the unprecedented responsibility. These aspects in themselves make Moses unique. But proceed even further, if you will, into the depths of this man's heart: at a point critical to the very existence of Israel, Moses places his own soul in jeopardy before God on behalf of his people. The Exodus account has just taken us through the giving of the Law upon Mount Sinai. Following this occurred the ratification of the covenant, as Moses sprinkled sacrificial blood upon the congregation. The magnitude of these events... the awesome fearfulness of God's descent upon the mountain, and the solemnity of the inauguration ceremony...should have served to restrain the infant nation from transgressing, but no... Aaron led them into a brief, despicable return to idolatry and hedonism, in the incident of the golden calf, while Moses met alone with God on the mountaintop. God's swift response is to threaten to destroy them en masse. But listen to Moses:

Oh, these people have sinned a great sin, and have made for themselves a god of gold! Yet now, if You will forgive their sin--but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written. (Ex. 32:31-32)

Moses demonstrates a love and devotion for the people that exceeds that of any mere national leader, even the greatest, for he offers himself, his own person, in the stead of his followers. He will take their just punishment upon himself, not even deserving it, if in so doing, their own punishment might be mitigated. We find in this one man both the most masterful of leaders, and yet the humblest of servants. A Prophet like Moses...? Where in the entire span of our history does such a person appear, one who collects within himself the entirety of the spirit of Moses, and perhaps even exceeds it? To whom did Moses refer? Could it be Messiah?

The arrival of this Person, whose prominence increases with the addition of each scriptural clue, continues to seem painfully delayed. But the focus narrows as history proceeds, until we can actually pinpoint him as a descendant of the great King David. This patriarch possessed the same unlikely combination of qualities as Moses: a mas-

terful leader who was also profoundly humble. God promised to this beloved king a unique offspring:

And it shall be, when your days are fulfilled, when you must go to be with your fathers, that I will set up your seed after you, who will be of your sons; and I will establish his throne forever. I will be his Father, and he shall be My son; and I will not take My Mercy away from him, as I took it from him who was before you. And I will establish him in My house and in My kingdom forever, and his throne shall be established forever. (1 Chron. 17:11-14)

Through the pages of the Psalms and the prophets the allusions seem to multiply. Our hearts begin to thrill in heightened expectation as ever more specific evidence mounts regarding this individual and his identity. But if we shuffle through the now substantial body of references, and we earnestly attempt to complete the portrait of this Person that we began assembling from the Bible's earliest pages, we find mysterious and even incongruous elements.

In the second psalm we find him referred to as the Lord's messiah, the Son of God, in stern judgment dispensing with the wicked, and governing the earth in omnipotent might. Psalm 72, attributed to Solomon, a son of David, depicts a royal ruler whose wealth and grandeur and majesty are unprecedented, and whose reign is eternal. But in spite of His lofty position, this King will reach out in love and compassion to the poor and needy.

Isaiah's depictions of Messiah present what appear to be irreconcilable opposites. In the famous prophecy of chapter nine, He is afforded what can only be divine status :

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform it. (vs. 6-7).

It's as if the shroud that has covered Messiah has been nearly removed, and He steps forth in resplendent glory! What do we learn? He will appear as a Child. He is indeed David's descendant. He will rule forever, establishing a kingdom of unending righteousness.

But in the latter chapters of this book, a strangely disparate description is offered of a future Figure who will be absolutely central to the nation's history, but a person of sorrow and suffering whose life appears to have been spent as far from the palaces of rulership and royalty as one could possibly get:

Behold, My Servant shall deal prudently, He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high... His visage was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men; so shall He sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths at Him; for what had not been told them they shall see, and what they had not heard they shall consider.
(52:13-15)

As if such descriptions were not in themselves sufficiently puzzling and exasperating, the following chapter introduces us to further details regarding this individual that fill us with conflicting emotions: repugnance at such a state of degradation, but fascination; pity and sympathy, but with a strange, unshakeable sense of personal culpability; and complete bewilderment as to how any human being could achieve such a state of existence. The passage is too long to quote here in its entirety. I will leave it up to you to find and read it. An paraphrase of the text would be as follows: a certain unprepossessing Man of humble origins will appear in our land, exciting no interest nor admiration whatsoever from any personal charisma He may possess. In fact, we will find ourselves unaccountably abhorring Him. But He will be invested with a singular mission, one absolutely unprecedented in our history: He will bear our sorrows, and carry our griefs. By some extraordinary act of transference, He Himself will also be wounded for our transgressions, and be bruised for our iniquities. Upon Him (...good Lord, how can such a thing be?!...) God will lay all our iniquity. The sight of His suffering will be so revolting that we can only hide our faces from Him. Furthermore, we will arrive at the almost untenable conclusion that it is God Himself that has authored the misery of this Figure whose compassion and virtue are apparently limitless, and whose submissive acceptance of His mission of redemption is with the obedience and humility of an innocent little lamb! To further confound the matter, His successful carrying through of His task will afford Him extraordinary reward in direct proportion to His humiliation, this One who has borne our iniquities and our sin. The following chapters then burst forth in an ecstatic, echoing trumpet fanfare of millennial glories and fulfillment for Israel and all the world that floods our hearts with joy. Through these several chapters of the prophet Isaiah, we have traversed scenes of extraordinary contrast. Having been compelled, as it were, to descend into an abysmal valley to view an act of unspeakably difficult vicarious suffering, we are invited to ascend the slopes of sun-drenched peaks that bespeak consummate victory both for the Sufferer and the ones for whom He has suffered!

Who can this be? Has this Individual arrived, or is He yet to come? Even the rabbis were mystified, when attempting to to harmonize these and many other biblical references into a single messianic figure. Many could only conclude that there would be two messiahs: one to suffer, and another to reign! Given the preponderance of allusions to a single person, however, such an explanation is hardly acceptable. But how could any one person possibly both present Himself to God as a sin offering, with all of the apparently attendant agonies associated with that sacrifice, and also be slated to reign in incontrovertible power and splendor over both Israel and the world?

The last mention of Messiah in the Tanakh is with a singular note of warning. This “Messenger of the covenant”, as He is called, will appear with the blazing light of holy anger in His eyes. In Malachi chapter three we read:

But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire and a launderer's soap, He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver. (vs. 2-3a)

Dear listener, what do you think? I know of only one Figure in all of earthly history who can embody such opposites. Do you see His likeness in Moses and David, those men who both ruled and served? Do not our hearts yearn toward Him, this great King who departed His heavenly throne in infinite condescension to assume our form, to dwell among us, to endure the summary rejection of His people, only in dying to bear our sins, that a way might be made to assure us of eternal delight in the presence of the God from whom our sins have sundered us? Do not many yet await His triumphant return, when His enemies shall be made His footstool, and the messianic age will be ushered in?

Yes, Messiah!