I would like to get back into the practice of devoting one post a week to answering questions raised by blog members. I have a fairly long list of good questions I haven’t been able to get to, so why not just go through them week by week? If you have any pressing questions that are particularly intriguing or perplexing for you about the NT or early Christianity or any related topic, let me know as a comment on a post (any post will do, whether relevant or not). If it’s not something I can address or that I can answer in a line or two, I’ll let you know. Otherwise, I can add it to the list!

At the top of my current list is the following.

**QUESTION:**

I wonder if you could talk about Isaiah 53 which I think is also a later insert by the scribes trying to justify what they had done to Jesus.

**RESPONSE:**

Ah, now *this* is a passage that students bring up every time I teach a class on the New Testament. Hundreds of years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah predicted in detail his crucifixion for the sins of the world, to be followed by his resurrection. It’s right there in black and white, in Isaiah 53. Why don’t Jew’s SEE that?? It’s in their own Bible! Are they blind? Can’t they READ????

As it turns out, my students as a rule don’t understand the issues with Isaiah 53; that’s not particularly strange – most people don’t! The problem is not that the passage was a later insertion into the text of Isaiah; it instead involves what Isaiah was talking about. I’ve discussed the issue before several times, but it’s one that regularly comes up; here is how I explain it all in my most recent book, Heaven and Hell.

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Isaiah 52:13-53:12 is a passage that has long been cited by Christian interpreters as a virtually infallible prophecy of the death and resurrection of the messiah - i.e., Jesus. But that is almost certainly a misreading of the passage, at least as the author of Isaiah originally intended it. The passage deals with the “suffering servant” of the LORD. But in its original context the servant does not appear to be the future messiah.

Of course Jesus is not named in the passage. But even more surprising to many Christian readers who learn this for the first time, the word “messiah” never occurs in it either. There is a good reason for the surprise: it is hard indeed for Christians to read the chapter and not think that it is speaking specifically about Jesus.

He was despised and rejected by others;

A man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity...

He was despised, and we held him of no account
Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases...

He was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities.

Upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed. (Isaiah 53:3-5)

Not only did this unnamed servant of the LORD suffer because of others, he also is vindicated by God. Doesn’t this refer to the resurrection of Jesus?

Out of his anguish he shall see light;
He shall find satisfaction through his knowledge.

The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong
because he poured out himself to death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.

Yet he bore the sin of many,
And made intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:11-12)

The main reason it is so difficult for Christian readers to see these words and not think “Jesus” is because for many centuries theologians have indeed argued that the passage is a messianic prophecy looking forward to the Christian savior. Anyone who is first shown this passage and told it is about Jesus will naturally always read it that way. Of course it’s about Jesus! Who else could it be about? This is surely a prophecy of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection made centuries before the fact.

Still, it is important to stress not only that the passage never...

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